

Université de Montréal

The Multiple Voices of Indenture History:  
The South Asian Diasporic Novel in English

par

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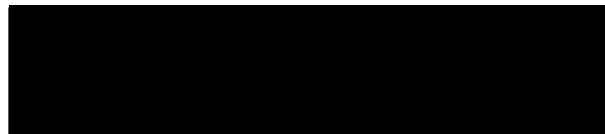
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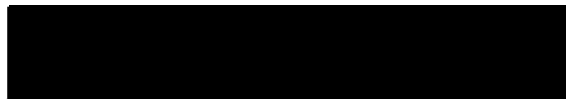
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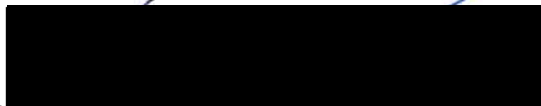
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## Abstract

This thesis first posits a theoretical distinction between two major historical waves of South Asian migration: the dispersal of South Asian peoples as “indentured labourers” or “passenger Indians” during the greater part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century to the colonies of the British Empire, and the more contemporary movements of South Asian peoples to the Western Hemisphere and Western Asia since the decolonization of the British Empire and a post-World War era. This thesis examines the nascent stage of novel production by the descendants of the first major wave of South Asian migration. In so doing, it focuses on “South Asian diasporic writers” whose historical genesis is directly or indirectly related to the phenomenon of “indentured labour,” and whose novels are rooted in the diasporic location which their ancestors came to inhabit as colonial subjects and subsequently transformed over multiple generations.

Since its formation along the historical trajectory of indentured labour in a post-emancipation economy, the South Asian diaspora carries residual echoes of the African/Afro-Caribbean diaspora, which necessarily intersects its historical vector. The writers of the South Asian diaspora nonetheless assert a distinct diasporic imaginary that is commonly thematized in their early novels as a shared mythology of indenture, migration and (re)settlement; they also evoke a distinct diasporic consciousness that is paradoxically grounded in the critical juncture between ontological ambivalence and an essentializing politics of identity.

On the one hand, the novels examined in this thesis bring to view formal patterns, leit motifs, thematic concerns and tropes that are repeated across the body of

South Asian diasporic writing; on the other hand, these novels are situated in numerous geopolitical regions which disclose national, linguistic, religious, socioeconomic and other factors of differentiation. These novels are accordingly approached as a unified body of writing in light of the following interdependent theoretical suppositions: a) since the fundamental characteristic of a diaspora is the notion of “dispersal” across space and time, South Asian diasporic novels comprise a cross-continental body of writing that is simultaneously cross-cultural (global) and context-specific (local); and b) the diasporic novel can be seen to pivot around multiple traditions, settings and points of reference, thereby displacing rigid binaries or monolithic theoretical paradigms which do not accommodate the diasporic subject’s “multiple positioning” within a complex and dynamic network of individual, communal, national, trans-national and ancestral ties.

This thesis thus offers a simultaneously comparative and context-specific reading of the “South Asian diasporic novel” as it is commonly imagined in the poetics of a diasporic imaginary and consciousness; rhizomatically rooted in the heterogeneous traditions of South Asian civilizations; articulated in what I refer to as “the vocabulary of indenture”; and particularized in the multiple locations which South Asian diasporic peoples have come to call “home”—namely, East and South Africa, the islands of the Indian Ocean and Pacific Rim, the Caribbean Region and South-East Asia.

As such, this thesis adds to rather than replicates the body of scholarship on writers of South Asian origins. This is because it brings into comparative focus a seemingly disparate group of writers whose distinctly “South Asian diasporic perspectives” serve as the structural and psychological cornerstone of their novels.

These writers are Deepchand Beeharry (Mauritius), Peter Nazareth (Uganda), Farida Karodia (South Africa), Rooplall Monar (Guyana), Narmala Shewcharan (Guyana), Lakshmi Persaud (Trinidad), Sharlow Mohammed (Trinidad), K.S. Maniam (Malaysia) and Gopal Baratham (Singapore).

**Key Words:** South Asian Diaspora -- Indian Diaspora -- Indentured Labour -- Diaspora Theory -- South Asian Literature -- African Literature -- Caribbean Literature -- South-East Asian Literature -- Post-Colonial Literature -- The Novel

## Sommaire

Cette thèse fait premièrement une distinction théorique entre deux principales vagues historiques d'immigration en provenance du Sud de l'Asie : La dispersion des gens originaires du Sud de l'Asie comme travailleurs sous contrat (*indentured labourers*), pendant la plus part du dix-neuvième siècle et au début du vingtième siècle, vers les colonies de l'empire britannique et les déplacements plus récents des gens originaires du Sud de l'Asie vers l'occident et l'ouest de l'Asie depuis la décolonisation de l'empire britannique et la période de l'après guerre (mondial). Cette thèse examine le stade naissant de la production littéraire par les descendants de la première principale vague d'immigrants provenant du Sud de l'Asie. Pour ce faire, cette thèse centre l'attention sur les «écrivains de la diaspora sud-asiatique» dont leur genèse historique les rattache soit directement, soit indirectement, au phénomène des travailleurs sous contrat (*indentured labourers*). Leurs romans sont enracinés dans les lieux de la diaspora où leurs ancêtres ont habité comme sujets coloniaux et ultérieurement transformés au travers des générations.

Depuis sa formation et tout au long de la trajectoire historique des travailleurs sous contrat dans une économie de post-émancipation, la diaspora sud-asiatique traîne les échos résiduels de la diaspora africaine/afro-caraïbe et qui forcément traversera son vecteur historique. Les écrivains de la diaspora sud-asiatique font preuve d'un imaginaire distinctif issu de leur condition de diaspora et qui est thématifiée et rependue dans leurs premiers romans sous forme de mythologie commune du travailleur sous contrat (*indentured labourers*) et d'immigration; ils évoquent une

conscience de diaspora distincte que paradoxalement est basée sur la conjonction critique entre l'ambivalence de l'ontologie et d'une politique d'identité exclusive.

D'un côté, les romans examinés dans cette thèse font ressortir modèles formels, leitmotifs, thématiques et tropes qui se répètent tout au long du corps des textes de la diaspora sud-asiatique. D'un autre côté, ces romans se situent dans un grand nombre de régions géographiques, révélés par des facteurs qui permettent de différencier entre autres, leur nationalité, leur langue, leur religion et leur statut socioéconomique.

Ces romans sont approchés comme une entité d'écriture unifiée d'après les suppositions théoriques interdépendantes suivantes : a) étant donné que la caractéristique fondamentale d'une diaspora est la notion d'une «dispersion» spatiale et temporelle, les romans de la diaspora sud-asiatique forment un corpus intercontinental qui se prête à une approche qui est à la fois interculturelle (global) et contextuelle (local) ; b) les romans de la diaspora peuvent être vus comme pivotant autour de traditions, sites et points de référence multiples, déplaçant des paradigmes théoriques binaires ou monolithiques qui n'accommodent pas le réseau complexe et dynamique d'individus, de communautés, de nations, de continents et de liens ancestraux où habitent les individus d'une diaspora (*multiple positioning*).

Cette thèse offre simultanément une lecture comparée et contextuelle *du roman de la diaspora sud-asiatique* comme elle est communément évoquée dans l'imaginaire et conscience de la diaspora; enracinée comme un rhizome dans les traditions hétérogènes des civilisations sud-asiatiques; exprimées par ce que je nomme «le vocabulaire du travailleur sous contrat» (*a vocabulary of indenture*) et particularisé par les sites multiples que les peuples issus de la diaspora sud-asiatique

connaissent maintenant comme leur «chez-soi», c'est-à-dire, l'Afrique de l'est et du sud, les îles des océans Indien et Pacifique, la région des Caraïbes et l'Asie du sud-est.

Cette thèse est un apport plutôt qu'une réplique du travail académique sur les écrivains d'origine sud-asiatique, parce qu'elle amène une comparaison centrée sur ce que paraissait être un groupe disparate d'auteurs dont leurs visions distinctives sont la base formelle et psychologique de leurs romans. Ces écrivains sont : Deepchand Beeharry (Île Maurice), Peter Nazareth (Ouganda), Farida Karodia (Afrique du sud), Rooplall Monar (Guyane), Narmala Shewcharan (Guyane), Lakshmi Persaud (Trinidad), Sharlow Mohammed (Trinidad), K.S. Maniam (Malaisie) et Gopal Baratham (Singapour).

**Mots clés:** La diaspora sud-asiatique -- la diaspora indienne -- travail sous contrat (*indentured labour*) -- la théorie de la diaspora -- la littérature sud-asiatique -- la littérature africaine -- la littérature du caraïbe -- la littérature de l'Asie du sud-est -- la littérature post-coloniale -- le roman

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*To my parents,  
for showing me the world . . .*

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## **PART I - “Diaspora”**

## Introduction

## **Introduction: The Multiple Voices of Indenture History**

In his seminal works on cultural identity, anthropologist James Clifford calls for a “better comparative awareness” of “diaspora cultures” (“Travelling Cultures” 108). In the same breath, he laments that little is known about the South Asian Diaspora, which came into being during the British colonial era in a post-emancipation economy. Clifford thus acknowledges that specialization in this area is a prerequisite to any such comparative awareness: “The Asian laborer’s view of ‘The New World’, knowledge derived from displacement, was certainly quite different. [. . .] comparative cultural studies would be very interested in such knowledge” (107).

This study is one such modest attempt at filling the considerable gap across the various fields of scholarship on the South Asian Diaspora. Though this study is necessarily literary in scope, it is approached through a simultaneously specialized and comparative lens that brings to view the South Asian Diaspora’s global reach and localized geopolitical contexts, its historical underpinnings, its cross-cultural diversity and, of course, its imaginative range.

### **Historical Background:**

The movements and migrations of South Asian peoples predate European colonial history, and can be traced back to several millennia of intellectual exchange, inter-cultural contact and vigorous trade that is most tellingly manifested in the

imprint of Hindu, Buddhist and, later, Islamic civilizations across the Asian continent. However, the largest exodus of South Asian peoples on a “global” scale occurred under the auspices of the British colonial administration in the demand for manual labour on sugar, rubber, tea and coffee plantations; for such projects as the construction of the East Africa Railway; and in the need for administrators, servicemen/women, merchants and traders.

The immigration of South Asian peoples during the greater part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century can be called the first major wave of migration which gave rise to the South Asian Diaspora. Indeed, no continent was left untouched by the arrival of South Asian peoples, together with their diverse range of languages, knowledge systems, religious beliefs, social mores and cultural traditions. The principal recipients of South Asian immigrants in unprecedented numbers were East and South Africa, the Caribbean Region, South-East Asia and the islands of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Rim. The Indian Subcontinent was also indelibly altered by both the push and pull of migration at this time, the most significant example being that of Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) which received a staggering one million and a half immigrants of largely Tamil origins.<sup>1</sup>

While it was still a settler colony, Canada<sup>2</sup> also received a small number of migrants around the turn of the twentieth century, but their populations remained negligible until the mid-twentieth century. In fact, shortly after the earliest influx of Chinese and South Asian peoples to North America, “Asian” immigration was prohibited or severely curtailed up until the post-World War II era. In the United States, for example, anti-miscegenation and anti-immigration laws culminated in the implementation of the Oriental Exclusion Act in 1924 which banned immigration

from Asian countries; similarly, South Asians were denied entry into Canada by 1908 and immigration remained strictly controlled as late as the 1970s<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, even though the South Asian presence in the Western Hemisphere emerged alongside European imperial expansion,<sup>4</sup> South Asian immigration to North America, Europe and Britain's former settler colonies mainly brings to view a second major wave of migration whose initial catalysts were the inter-related factors of the post-World War era and the decolonization of the British Empire. For instance, the period between the 1960s and 1980s witnessed an influx of South Asians as a response to Europe and North America's shortage of industrial, skilled and professional labour and the subsequent lifting of its racially-discriminatory immigration policies. During this period, the Mid-East oil boom also created a demand for South Asian labour in Gulf Arab states, which has created another major axis of the South Asian Diaspora. Suffice it to say, *en masse* South Asian immigration to the Western Hemisphere and Western Asia in particular should be regarded as a more recent, on-going phenomenon in an increasingly globalized economy.

In contrast, the bulk of immigration to the afore-mentioned regions of the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Rim, South East Asia, East and South Africa and the Caribbean Region took place within a finite period between the 1830s and 1920s. The very sizeable presence of migrant populations in the British colonies necessitated various kinds of professional, administrative, commercial and domestic services. The ever-expanding Empire turned to its colonial subjects in the Indian Subcontinent<sup>5</sup> to help meet its increasing bureaucratic and other demands. For example, colonial functionaries in East Africa often regarded Goans (from the former Portuguese



colony of Goa along the southern Malabar Coast), as ideal clerics and administrators, given their English-speaking skills. In contrast, wholesalers and traders from the north-western state of Gujarat populated the commercial centres of East and South Africa as well as South East Asia, continuing a centuries-old tradition of mercantilism. Together, such migrants were referred to as “free passengers” or, in some colonies, as “khula” (‘open’)<sup>6</sup> since they were not bound by the contractual obligation of indentured labour, and since their arrival, settlement and return was, at least in theory, a matter of independent choice and means.

The majority of peoples who migrated during the colonial era, however, did so for the purposes of contractual work which came to be known as “indentured labour.” Indenture was the British Empire’s solution to an urgent shortage of manual labour, primarily in the plantation colonies, after the abolition of slavery. Indenture is defined as “a formal agreement, contract, or list [. . .] binding an apprentice to a master.” During the colonial era, indenture referred to the agreement signed by a person “to work for a set period for a colonial landowner in exchange for passage to the colony.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the major difference between the “free passenger” and “indentured” migrant was as follows: the former was generally an autonomous agent (albeit circumscribed by a colonial infrastructure) while the latter was “bound” by a written contract (covering a period of two to five years), which dictated everything from the terms and conditions of labour to the accommodations and freedom of movement (or lack thereof) in the colony.

The severely restrictive terms to which the indentured labourer consciously or unwittingly “agreed” resulted in his/her appellation as “*girmit-wallah/girmitiya*” or the “agreement people.” In his foundational historical text on the plight of the

indentured labourer, Hugh Tinker notes that “[i]n folk-art, the indentured Indian was always portrayed with his hands bound together, and shoulders hunched: for he was now a tied creature, a bondsman” (*A New System of Slavery* 179). In other words, the labourer was no longer a free agent but a doubly bonded entity as a colonial subject and as a contracted worker, headed for conditions which have been described as little better than slavery. Several stereotypes thus formed around the indentured labourer (as they did for the African slave), condemning him/her to images of servility and bondage.

Indeed, the use and abuse of indentured labourers grew out of the legacy of slavery and, at least in its earliest stages, bore an unsettling resemblance to its historical precursor. Prior to 1842, the exportation of labour from the northern and southern regions of the Indian Subcontinent<sup>8</sup> was an unregulated trade which neither the local nor colonial authorities cared to monitor or police. In fact, the first indentured labourers to have arrived in Mauritius ended up joining an older community of South Asian slaves who had served the French plantocracy as early as the 1700s. As the first colony to receive contracted workers from the Indian Subcontinent in unprecedented numbers, however, Mauritius became the blueprint from which a more regulated system of indenture developed, as much in the interest of Indo-British relations as in the upkeep of agricultural productivity.

On the one hand, the systemization of labour resulted in a more strictly legislated and principled administration of an otherwise haphazard trade; on the other hand, it merely facilitated in greater numbers the supply of workers who continued to be regarded as “units of production” (Tinker 38). Like slavery, the indenture system was eventually dissolved, coming to an official end in 1922, after three generations of

labour at a very low cost to the European plantocracy and British administration.<sup>9</sup> Like the African slave, too, the vast majority of labourers had little choice but to settle permanently in their diasporic location,<sup>10</sup> thereby creating multi-generational communities whose mythic and historic beginnings continue to be traced to the moment of their ancestors' "arrival" in the colonies, thousands of miles from "home."

Table I outlines the earliest recorded years of entry to the destinations under study. It also provides current population ratios of ethnic South Asians in relation to the total population of each region:

Table I

Earliest Year of "Arrival" in Diasporic Region:	Diasporic Region (principal locations):	Ethnic South Asians Est. % of total pop.- 2002	Total Population Est. – 2002:
1834	<b>Indian Ocean:</b> Mauritius	68%	1.2 million
1834/1901 (Migration to East Africa began early; by 1901 labourers arrived in large numbers to build the East Africa Railway)	<b>East Africa:</b> Kenya  Tanzania  Uganda	0.3%  0.1%  1,000 (figure indicates number that stayed after expulsion edict of 1972)	31 million  37 million  24.6 million
1838	<b>The Caribbean:</b> - Guyana - Trinidad & Tobago	51% 40%	700,000 1.1 million
1844	<b>Southeast Asia:</b> - Malaysia - Singapore	8% 8%	22.6 million 4.5 million
1860	<b>South Africa</b>	2.6%	43.6 million

Although the ethnicity of South Asian diasporic peoples is generally classified as “Indian” in each of the regions identified above, it should be noted that I will refer to this diaspora as “South Asian” throughout this study. I employ the term “South Asian” in the hope that it will provide a more accurate reflection of the diverse origins of peoples who once resided across the vast geographic area of the Indian Subcontinent, as well as highlighting the positioning of these peoples within the Asian continent, itself an ancient arena of cross-cultural exchange.

Though the present-day countries of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives comprise what is interchangeably referred to as the Indian Subcontinent, the political, national and cultural currency of “Indian” as an extension of the “post-colonial” political entity that is India is indisputable. Divorced from its geographic designation, therefore, the use of the term “Indian” imposes a monolithic ethnic and cultural identity on peoples who, prior to 1947 (the year of independence which also gave rise to the partitioning of the Indian Subcontinent into East Pakistan, West Pakistan and India) thought of themselves in regional, ethnic and religious terms: i.e., as Punjabis, Tamils and Biharis, or as Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, etc. This would certainly have been the case for our early migrants who left their ancestral homeland one hundred years prior to Indian independence.

All theoretical, historical and literary studies to date nevertheless continue to refer to this diaspora as “Indian.”<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, even though literary critic Emmanuel S. Nelson notes that the use of the term “Indian Diaspora” incurs accusations of “historical inaccuracy and nationalist chauvinism” (Introduction x), he proceeds to employ the term in his foundational bio-bibliographical critical

sourcebook, *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*. Similarly, scholars who acknowledge the fact that Indian peoples themselves “do not always interpret the term ‘Indian diaspora’ in the same way” (Crane and Mohanran, Introduction vii), nonetheless use “Indian” and “South Asian” interchangeably.

I believe that the continued conflation or uncritical deployment of these terms perpetuates the “historical inaccuracy” to which Nelson alludes, while simultaneously leaving itself open to charges of an essentialist conception of South Asian identity. To this end, it is my contention that the term “South Asian” best reflects the historical and geopolitical breadth and complexity of a region which has undergone multiple identitarian reconfigurations not only since European colonization but over a period of five thousand years.

### **The Corpus:**

South Asian Diasporic Literature is either written by the descendants of the first major wave of migration which took place during the British colonial era or the second major wave of migration which arose (and continues to take shape) in the aftermath of decolonization. This study specifically examines the literatures of the former group: that is, the people of the South Asian diaspora whose historical genesis is either directly or indirectly related to the phenomenon of indentured labour and is therefore rooted in the history of British imperialism.

In most cases, the writers under study identify themselves as the descendants of indentured labourers; in a few cases, they allude to an ancestry of “free passengers” whose narratives are nonetheless intertwined in the unravelling social, cultural and economic fabric of indenture history and the ever-expansive cross-

cultural networks of a diasporic consciousness. In all cases, these writers are second, third, fourth or fifth generation descendants of the peoples who comprised the first major historical wave of migration between the 1830s and 1920s.

As subjects of the British Empire, the majority of the descendants of indentured labourers and free passengers alike would have received a colonial education; hence the proliferation of English language literatures by South Asian diasporic peoples and its intersection with many of the themes and tropes of post-colonial writing. Having said this, it should be noted that South Asian diasporic peoples continue to produce literature in their own ancestral languages, such as Hindi, Urdu, Bhojpuri, Tamil and Punjabi, not to mention more recent contributions to French and Creole literary production in such areas as the Mascarene archipelago.<sup>12</sup>

This study offers an entirely new consideration of South Asian Diasporic Literature in its focus on the English-language novel. To date, studies on South Asian Diasporic Literature have steered clear of generic distinctions, arbitrarily oscillating between poetry, short fiction, drama and the occasional novel. Moreover, when the novel is included in existing studies, scholars tend to uncritically rely on a handful of canonized “South Asian” authors (Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Hanif Kureishi, to name a few), regardless of their particular diasporic trajectories. I believe that there are several reasons for the above: a) the obvious recognizability of these authors in the Western Academy; b) the discouraging inaccessibility of diasporic texts outside (and often within) their regions of publication; and c) the relatively nascent stage of novel writing in English across the diaspora itself.

In all of the diasporic regions under study, novel production has proved to lag behind other genres, appearing as the final frontier for literary production after the

short story, poetry and drama. In fact, many of the writers under study who write across genre (namely, Peter Nazareth, Deepchand Beeharry, Gopal Baratham, K.S. Maniam, Rooplall Monar, Sharlow Mohammed and Farida Karodia) first garnered attention for their short fiction, poetry or plays before they turned their attention to novel writing. The recent emergence of the novel in many of these diasporic contexts can be accounted for in terms of both the technical and financial obstacles of publishing in small literary communities as well as the greater expense and risk that novel publication necessarily incurs if it is to reach an international audience.

As I will point out in each of my chapters, each region under study also brings to bear on the diasporic writer its own set of publishing opportunities, expectations and constraints. For instance, the paucity of English-language novel production in Mauritius or Malaysia has as much to do with the politics of the English language in Mauritius's dominant French/Creole environment or Malaysia's indigenous-Malay speaking population as it does with the numerous challenges of publishing. Conversely, the initial popularity of drama and poetry across the diaspora attests to the indelible influence of South Asia's ancient literary traditions on the diasporic consciousness, an influence that is poignantly captured in the fact that the dramatization of the Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, continue to be a common sight in regions as far-flung as the Caribbean or the Pacific Rim.

Thus, a study devoted solely to novel writing which delimits its historical parameters to the phenomenon of indenture, as well as particularizes diasporic experience in terms of the countries of settlement inhabited by the earlier wave of immigrants and their descendants, is long overdue. Indeed, I fear that the longer such texts elude critical scrutiny in this relatively early and perhaps crucial stage of novel



production, the greater the risk that they might prematurely fall out of print and into oblivion. This has already proven to be the case in many of the contexts under study, which has sadly eclipsed the full chronological spectrum of literary production in these regions.<sup>13</sup>

This study has been limited to Mauritius, Uganda, South Africa, Guyana, Trinidad, Malaysia and Singapore, because of each country's particular historical significance as a major diasporic location as well as its contribution to novel production in its wider regional setting. Uganda has been chosen as my point of focus in the East African region over and above Kenya and Tanzania because the former offers what I feel to be the most striking example of the tragic fate of the first wave of South Asian diasporic peoples in a post-colonial era. Conversely, I have had to exclude Fiji--where South Asian peoples share a volatile majority status with indigenous Fijians—since the body of writing that can be labelled “Indo-Fijian” does not as yet include novel production.

I have determined and limited the parameters of this seemingly vast and unruly global literary terrain on the basis of three principal criteria: a) the author's and/or his/her characters' subject positions in the diasporic location; b) a comparative look at male and female writers in each diasporic context; and c) a consideration of first novels.

My first criterion is contingent upon my conceptualization of diasporic experience and identity as a global phenomenon that is simultaneously highly localized and context-specific. To this end, I have included, wherever possible, those writers who have either remained within their diasporic locations or those writers whose retrospective narratives turn toward their diasporic points of origin for their

novels' settings, characters and themes. In this manner, I have attempted to provide an examination of the diasporic novel as it unfolds in or pertains to the diasporic location itself, rather than to rely on writers whose narrative perspectives have now shifted to the landscapes of their new countries of settlement in their subsequent migrations to Europe, North America or, in a few rare instances, South Asia.<sup>14</sup>

The majority of writers under study—namely, Mauritius's Deepchand Beeharry, Malaysia's K.S. Maniam, Singapore's Gopal Baratham, Guyana's Rooplall Monar and Trinidad's Sharlow Mohammed—have continued to reside in their countries of birth. As such, they offer a rare glimpse into contemporary diasporic experience from the perspective of the descendants of South Asian immigrants who are now several generations removed from the originary homeland, and who constitute a near-bicentennial presence in their diasporic locations.

The remainder of the writers under study—namely, Uganda's Peter Nazareth, South Africa's Farida Karodia, Guyana's Narmala Shewcharan and Trinidad's Lakshmi Persaud—can be said to have joined, either for personal, professional or political reasons, the second major wave of South Asian migration to the United States (Peter Nazareth), Britain (Narmala Shewcharan and Lakshmi Persaud) or Canada (Farida Karodia). Though these writers can now speak of a double diasporic identity as the descendants of the first major historical wave of migration who also form part of the newer diaspora in the Western Hemisphere, each of their oeuvres is set entirely in their respective diasporic points of origin. It should also be noted that a few of these writers (Peter Nazareth and Narmala Shewcharan) penned their first novels prior to their departure to the West.

As Clifford asserts, “[d]iasporic experiences are always gendered” (*Routes* 258). To this end, I have sought to provide, wherever possible, a male and female perspective in each of the regions under study. Indeed, the fact that diasporic writing has been a traditionally male-dominated activity reminds us that women have often found themselves silenced by the limiting parameters of old and new patriarchies: i.e., a double patriarchy consisting, on the one hand, of colonial structures and, on the other hand, of the religious doctrines and sociocultural norms transplanted by diasporic peoples themselves.

The Caribbean and South Africa have afforded such bases for comparison. Indeed, it is interesting to note that the Caribbean has seen a recent proliferation of novels by female writers. This might be as indicative of a break in a male-dominated tradition as of the increasing marketability of female writers over the last few decades since the emergence of feminist interrogations of Caribbean and post-colonial identity. Either way, it is a welcome addition to the body of Caribbean Literature in general and South Asian Diasporic literature in particular. Indeed, I am hopeful that it will prove to be a trend that will soon be duplicated across the diaspora.

My final criterion for selection is an emphasis on first novels. (The only exception to this rule has been that of the Mauritian writer, Deepchand Beeharry, for reasons which I discuss at length in Chapter Two.) First novels help establish a timeline of novel-production since many of these writers are the first or among the first to give voice to their diasporic experience in novel-form. More generally, first novels provide a consistent basis from which to gauge repeated patterns, leit motifs, formal trends and thematic concerns as they appear across the body of diasporic writing. For instance, with the exception of Gopal Baratham’s *A Candle or the Sun*, all of the

novels under study are constructed as evocations of a heretofore untold his/story, and accordingly chart a diasporic lineage which begins with the (memory of) the ancestral voyage to the colony or evokes the figure of the “grandmother” as the mythic and cultural link to the “motherland.”

In formal terms, there seems to be an overlap in post-colonial and diasporic writing insofar as the *bildungsroman* is the narrative mode of choice for many first-time novelists who consciously foreground the subjective nature of identity/history, particularly for once colonized peoples whose personal and collective identities have been marginalized by the master narratives of European imperialism. This formal trend seems particularly true of female writers whose stories have been drowned out by the double hegemonies of imperialism and patriarchy.

Table II provides a chronological overview of the writers under study. As can be seen, all of these writers were born in the decades just prior to their countries’ independence. With the exception of Farida Karodia who launched her novelistic career prior to the dissolution of the Apartheid state, these writers at least technically warrant their classification as “post-colonial” authors:

Table II

Author:	Year of Birth:	Country of Birth:	Title of First Novel:	Year of Publ.:
Deepchand Beeharry	1929 -	Mauritius	<i>Never Goodbye</i>	1965
Gopal Baratham	1935 -	Singapore	<i>A Candle or the Sun</i>	1991
Lakshmi Persaud	1939 -	Trinidad	<i>Butterfly in the Wind</i>	1990
Peter Nazareth	1940 -	Uganda	<i>In a Brown Mantle</i>	1971
K.S. Maniam	1942 -	Malaysia	<i>The Return</i>	1981
Rooplall Monar	1947 -	Guyana	<i>Janjhat</i>	1989
Sharlow Mohammed	1949 -	Trinidad	<i>The Elect</i>	1992
Narmal Shewcharan	1958 -	Guyana	<i>Tomorrow is Another Day</i>	1994
Farida Karodia	? -	South Africa	<i>Daughters of the Twilight</i>	1986

This study consists of six chapters. In Chapter One, I offer a working definition, critical discussion and theorization of “diaspora.” I then offer a theorization of the South Asian diaspora both as a cultural and historical phenomenon, as well as a literary paradigm. The five subsequent chapters function as historically and culturally specific examples of the three main geopolitical regions of the South Asian Diaspora: namely, Africa, the Caribbean Region and Southeast Asia.

In Chapters Two and Three, I examine the African context. Chapter Two is devoted solely to the historically pivotal context of Mauritius. Mauritius will serve as an introduction to the systemization of indenture. In fact, the sociohistorical novel

*That Others Might Live* (1976) by Deepchand Beeharry, the oldest writer under study, will establish the major tropes of the South Asian diasporic imaginary as it pertains to the dismal realities of plantation labour, the process of settlement in the plantation colonies, anti-colonial resistance, particularly against the abuses of the indenture system itself, and the emergence of a new collective diasporic consciousness.

In Chapter Three, I consider East and South Africa from a comparative perspective, because both contexts explicitly deconstruct the post-colonial paradigm. Farida Karodia's bildungsroman *Daughters of the Twilight* (1986) and Peter Nazareth's political satire *In a Brown Mantle* (1971) describe the effects of European racial ideologies on the indigenous African and diasporic South Asian psyche. Each novelist thus illustrates how diasporic peoples find themselves doubly marginalized within a nativist discourse and a European-imposed racial ideology. Not surprisingly, then, both authors expose the collusion between racially hierarchized political structures and the economically-driven interests of neo-colonial or apartheid states.

In Chapters Four and Five, I examine Guyana and Trinidad, the two countries of the Caribbean Region where South Asian diasporic communities constitute a majority or a shared majority position with their African counterparts. This is also the diasporic region which boasts the longest tradition of English-language novel production, beginning with such notable pioneers as Trinidad's V.S. Naipaul.<sup>15</sup>

Though Guyana is situated in South America, its history as a British colony which identifies as much (if not more) with the "British West Indies" as with its South American neighbours is made evident in its literary output. Indeed, as former plantation colonies which relied almost exclusively on South Asian indentured labour in a post-emancipation economy, Guyana and Trinidad offer the most striking basis

of comparison to Mauritius. For example, Rooplall Monar's detailed portrait of the plantation estate village as one of the lasting legacies (even as late as the post-colonial era) of the barracks-style accommodations and communally-oriented existence of indentured labourers thematically echoes Deepchand Beeharry's descriptions of the Indo-Mauritian community.

In Chapter Four, I examine Rooplall Monar's *Janjhat* (1989) and Narmala Shewcharan's *Tomorrow is Another Day* (1994). Comparatively, these authors reveal a subtle shift in the development of the Indo-Guyanese novel from a rural, community-based setting to a more politicized multi-racial urban portrait. Monar's use of a Hindi-based form of Creole can also be said to add a new linguistic texture to the body of Caribbean and South Asian Diasporic writing. Narmala Shewcharan also breaks narrative ground in her realistic indictment, from multiple Indo-Guyanese perspectives, of the Forbes Burnham dictatorship. She also offers a cross-sectional view of an urbanized Indo-Guyanese populace.

In Chapter Five, I examine Trinidadian authors Lakshmi Persaud and Sharlow Mohammed, both of whom echo Rooplall Monar's portrait of the tight-knit and self-enclosed nature of the diasporic community. While Persaud's bildungsroman *Butterfly in the Wind* (1990) locates cultural survival in the spiritual integrity of the diasporic community, Mohammed's scathing satire, *The Elect* (1992), offers a more pessimistic view of the extent to which neo-colonial forms of corruption, particularly manifested in American evangelism, have already spiritually bankrupted and economically disabled the diasporic community. In this light, each novel illustrates notions of community and commonality as projected fictions which betray their own caste, class, gender and religious differences.

In Chapter Six, I examine Malaysia and Singapore, countries which have charted distinct political, cultural and social destinies since the separation of the Malaysian Peninsula in the late 1960s. What the Islamic Republic of the indigenous Malay-dominated Malaysia and the decidedly secular Sino-dominated Singapore do have in common are their vibrant multi-ethnic communities as well as first world economies which have given rise to some of Asia's most thriving and illustrious urban centres. Both authors K.S. Maniam (Malaysia) and Gopal Baratham (Singapore) thus expose a rare view of South Asian diasporic experience as it plays itself out within the Asian continent. K.S. Maniam's bildungsroman *The Return* (1981) and Gopal Baratham's kunstslerroman *A Candle or the Sun* (1991) distinctly echo the metaphors of alienation found in urban-centred novels set in the West; however, they do so with the added dimension of minority identity politics in contemporary South East Asian society.

In my conclusion, I will provide an overview of the shared and divergent themes, tropes and developments to be found in this body of writing. I will also provide a theoretical overview of the extent to which diasporic writing deconstructs and problematizes monolithic cultural and literary paradigms.

### **Methodology:**

Diasporas, as I have suggested, necessarily produce a shared set of features and characteristics. However, as I will caution throughout this study, these are entirely contingent upon the historical, temporal and territorial trajectories along which they come into being. In other words, the South Asian Diaspora must be regarded as a far-reaching (because globally dispersed) entity that pivots around a multi-pronged



cultural, national, and historical axis: i.e., a “multiple centred diaspora network” (Clifford, *Routes* 248). Thus, the South Asian Diaspora necessitates a comparative, cross-cultural approach that is simultaneously grounded in an inter-disciplinary epistemology—one which looks toward cultural theory, sociology, anthropology, historical analysis, feminist studies, etc., as much as it looks toward literary criticism and theory. This is because each diasporic axis determines the particular historical, literary and cultural lens through which we might best appreciate the aesthetics and theoretics of the diasporic text, and vice versa. In other words, I have allowed the texts to speak for themselves, guided by an approach that is open to the cross-cultural points of reference, influence and exchange at play in each particular region.

The South Asian Diaspora has only recently caught the attention of a limited but steadily increasing number of scholars and critics whose works have laid the archival, historiographic and theoretical cornerstones of indenture history and South Asian diasporic experience. My own work is greatly indebted to historians Hugh Tinker, Marina Carter and David Northrup for bringing to the fore the documents and archives of indenture history and for their analyses of the working and living conditions of indentured labourers. All other historical background has been gathered from the scholarship available on the national and/or geopolitical areas to be examined. Because of the vast territory to be covered throughout this study, together with my emphasis throughout on the need for contextualization, I preface Chapters Two to Six with an historical and demographic overview of each region under study.

All bibliographic, biographical and other pertinent information regarding the authors and their oeuvres has been gathered from scholarship available in the form of reviews, literary criticism, reference material, internet resources such as the

University of Berkeley's website on the South Asian Diaspora,<sup>16</sup> and publishers' insights.

This study invariably incorporates a wider spectrum of theoretical and critical writing on South Asian Literature in English as a whole. Each chapter will thereby serve as a critical introduction to the existing body of scholarship on the literatures of South Asian diasporic peoples in each of these regions. Subsequently, I will provide a cross-referential overview of the confluent and divergent approaches of Western and non-Western literary criticism and theoretical inquiry as they comment on the issues, thematics and aesthetics of the South Asian diasporic imagination.

Thus, cultural and literary theorists and critics who work exclusively on the regions under study (e.g., Peter Nazareth's critical surveys of East African Literature; Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's and Kirpal Singh's theorizations of Southeast Asian Literature in English; and Frank Birbalsingh's numerous critical studies on Indo-Caribbean history and literature) will be given voice alongside those who work on broader theoretical questions (e.g., Vijay Mishra's theorization of the "Indian" diasporic imaginary; Arun Mukherjee's investigations of post-coloniality; and Stuart Hall's conceptualization of the African Diaspora). Such works will help to further contextualize and define the cultural and other paradigms (e.g., hybridity, trans-culturation, cross-culturalism and post-coloniality), which are often challenged or addressed in South Asian Diasporic Literature.

In foregrounding these writers' subject positions, I do not wish to undermine the particular aesthetic merits of their texts. On the contrary, I hope to highlight the extent to which these texts themselves either critically or unconsciously challenge readings that homogenize and oversimplify not only the complex nature of diasporic

identity but also of a “multiply positioned” and therefore inherently cross-cultural imagination.

Finally, my objective is to add to rather than replicate the body of scholarship on writers of the South Asian Diaspora. As such, I have avoided an uncritical reliance on a few literary giants, aiming instead to bring into comparative focus, for the first time in literary scholarship, a group of writers who have forged wholly new literary terrain, be it for their novels’ thematic concerns, geographic settings, stylistic and/or linguistic innovations and/or particular perspectives as diasporic subjects.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This study is limited to overseas communities (the diaspora), and does not consider countries of the Indian Subcontinent where the pull of migration also occurred at the behest of British colonial interests.

<sup>2</sup> As early as the 1820s, a group of Punjabi-Sikhs migrated to the south-western United States, where many of these migrant labourers eventually established prosperous farm-owning communities. At the turn of the twentieth century, Punjabi-Sikhs also formed the first major South Asian community in Canada, settling in British Columbia where they worked mainly as agricultural labourers.

<sup>3</sup> In her demographic overview of "Overseas Indians," K. Laxmi Narayan ascribes the change to the passage of the 1976 Immigration Act which institutionalized less racially selective admission practices. See also Thomas Sowell's discussion of the shift in migration policies in the Western Hemisphere in *Migrations and Cultures: A World View*.

<sup>4</sup> The Western hemisphere's history of South Asian immigration is as old as the British Raj itself. South Asians have populated Britain for almost three hundred years both as domestic servants and professionals schooled in law and medicine.

<sup>5</sup> The British presence in the Indian Subcontinent lasted for a period of over 400 years. The first permanent trading post was established in 1612 in Gujarat. Imperial rule began much later in the aftermath of the 1857 rebellion. In 1858, the East India Company was transferred to the British Crown and by 1876 Queen Victoria proclaimed herself Empress of India. British Imperial Rule in the Subcontinent lasted till 1947, the year of Indian and Pakistani Independence.

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Tinker, in *A New System of Slavery*, notes that free passengers were often called "khula" and indentured labourers "girmitwallahs." Both are Hindi terms.

<sup>7</sup> This definition of "indenture" is found in the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>8</sup> South Asian immigrants came mainly from the northern region of Bihar, though there was also a spat of immigration from the southern region of Madras. The majority of immigrants were Hindus; the remainder were primarily Muslims and Christians. (See Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery*, Larry Bowman's *Mauritius*:

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*Democracy and Development* and Marina Carter's *Servants, Settlers and Sirdars: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1871.*)

<sup>9</sup> See Larry W. Bowman, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Historians state that many indentured labourers were promised not only a free passage to the colony but also a "return passage" upon completion of the contracted period. The return passage was not always honoured, or simply proved unaffordable to those who were willing to pay the price of the journey home.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, Emmanuel S. Nelson's *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, Vijay Mishra's "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora."

<sup>12</sup> Here I am referring specifically to Indo-Mauritian writers who live in a society where French and Creole dominate cultural and literary production. Deepchand Beeharry, for instance, writes in English, French and Hindi.

<sup>13</sup> South Africa and East Africa are two such regions.

<sup>14</sup> Patterns of migration during the twentieth century suggest that diasporic subjects of today rarely return to the Indian Subcontinent. Subsequent migrations are usually to Britain, the United States, Canada and, to a lesser extent, Australia.

<sup>15</sup> Naipaul's first novel is *The Mystic Masseur* (1958). It is set in Trinidad, his place of birth.

<sup>16</sup> The University of Berkeley has thus far provided the most thorough and engaging cross-disciplinary bibliographic on-line resource of the South Asian Diaspora. [www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/SouthAsia/diaspora.html](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/SouthAsia/diaspora.html).

## **Chapter 1 - Theorizing (the South Asian) Diaspora**

## The “Multiply Positioned” South Asian Diasporic Imaginary

South Asian immigration during the colonial era gave rise to one of the largest diasporas in human history. A diasporic consciousness is therefore a fundamental characteristic of these globally scattered peoples.

While many cultural theorists, sociologists and anthropologists agree that “diaspora” warrants provisional rather than categorical definition, I hope to delimit and differentiate the term from the various other cultural paradigms which are arbitrarily circulating across the fields of literary criticism today. Drawing on the above scholars’ seminal discussions of “diaspora cultures” (Clifford, *Routes* 251) as neither strictly exclusivist nor de-territorialized entities, I will offer my own theorization of “diaspora” as a general cultural paradigm and in its particular application to South Asian peoples and their literatures. Subsequently, I will emphasize throughout this study that “diaspora” should not be seen as a porous trope for all manner of cultural phenomena; rather, I will argue that it must be considered in historically and culturally specific terms.

Diaspora is a derivation of the Greek term, *diasperien*: the prefix *dia* means “across” and the root *-sperien* means “to sow or scatter seeds.”<sup>1</sup> Immediately, therefore, diaspora connotes not simply the phenomenon of travel but also of transplantation; a permanent settlement rather than a temporary uprooting. Diasporas are traditionally synonymous with the religious persecution of Jewish peoples or, more recently, with the enslavement of African peoples.<sup>2</sup> Each of these normative

examples should immediately suggest that a group of people come to form a diaspora according to a shared set of interdependent historical, ethnic, religious or other attributes. As all of the major diasporas illustrate, such as those of Jewish, African, Palestinian, Armenian, Chinese and South Asian peoples, a diasporic consciousness arises out of vastly different historical conjunctures and should thus be viewed in polythetic terms rather than through a singular taxonomical lens.

In *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, sociologist Robin Cohen argues that “diasporas” should not be restricted to either the classical denotation of the term used in ancient Greece--i.e., as a form of colonization--nor the biblical connotation of the term found in the Old Testament--i.e., as a form of banishment and persecution. Instead, Cohen broadens the definition of the term as follows:

The idea of a diaspora thus varies greatly. However, all diasporic communities settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories, acknowledge that the ‘old country’ – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions. That claim may be strong or weak, boldly or meekly articulated in a given circumstance or historical period, but a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background. (Introduction ix)

In his comparative consideration of numerous ethnic collectives that are defined as, or define themselves as, “diasporas,” Cohen provides a helpful typology that consists of five principal distinctions: *a*) victim/refugee (e.g., Jews, Palestinians, Africans, Armenians); *b*) imperial/colonial (e.g., British, French, Dutch, Portuguese); *c*) labour/service (e.g., Indians, Chinese, Italians); *d*) trade/professional (e.g., Venetians, Lebanese, Chinese); and *e*) cultural/hybrid/post-modern (e.g., Caribbean peoples).<sup>3</sup>



Although Cohen rightly suggests that none of the above is a mutually exclusive category, he nonetheless underestimates the extent to which the South Asian diaspora, in its demographic scale alone, eludes definitive classification. For instance, those who emigrated as “free passengers” might qualify as a “trade/professional” diaspora. Moreover, one should not rule out the South Asian’s experience of “victim-/refugeehood,” given Tinker’s assessment of indentured labour as a “new system of slavery,” together with Northrup’s suggestion that the push for migration from the Indian Subcontinent had as much to do with the disruptive effects of British colonial rule as with the prospect of material opportunities overseas.

This is not to suggest that diasporas are too historically specific or too nebulous a phenomenon to defy epistemological inquiry altogether. On the contrary, given their formation within different and sometimes convergent temporal trajectories, diasporas can be viewed interchangeably as an historical phenomenon, a cultural paradigm and an ontological positioning which gives rise to a certain kind of collective consciousness grounded within a certain kind of politics of location.

As most contemporary cultural theorists and anthropologists contend, diaspora has become a catch-all symbol of twentieth century movement and migration, particularly given the rapid technological advancements which have taken place in communications and travel technologies, and the subsequent increase in border-crossings, be they physical or “virtual.” I would also add that it has become a particularly misappropriated term since its cooptation by post-structural, post-modern and post-colonial theories, each of which tends to typecast all manner of migrants as hyphenated and therefore hybrid and deterritorialized entities.

Of course, since diasporas are essentially a collective of immigrants, they necessarily share the features of other kinds of migratory patterns. For instance, though diasporas do not necessarily come into being as a group-in-exile, their separation from the homeland sometimes results in the evocation of the feelings of alienation, loss and the yearning to return to the originary homeland that exiles (and indeed other kinds of immigrants) so often express. Similarly, diasporic subjects can often be mistaken for an expatriate community since they too can be seen to live “outside” and “across” one or more national entities and yet strive to maintain distinctive if not exclusive communities in the host society.

Not surprisingly, therefore, diasporas are often conflated with phenomena such as exile, expatriatism, borderlands and globalization. This is because all of the above phenomena share two principal features insofar as they describe a) the process of migration and b) the “contact zones of nations, cultures, and regions” (Clifford, *Routes* 245). To this end, James Clifford proposes that the diaspora paradigm is best examined “diacritically,” given its intersections with other cultural phenomena.

As I have suggested, however, migratory patterns are historically and culturally specific such that they may or may not function epiphenomenally. For instance, a diaspora’s dwelling “between” multiple locations should not be confused with the paradigm of “borderlands,” which has arisen in the wake of the border crossings and disputes between Mexico and the United States. Indeed, Chicano writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa expose national boundaries as hegemonic spaces which delimit “citizenry”<sup>4</sup> in the containment of cultural and ethnic identities. Many diasporic writers echo Anzaldúa’s desire not to be “labelled” in artificially delineated terms. While border theory aims to deconstruct territoriality as a binary opposition.<sup>5</sup>

however, diasporas often reconfigure themselves as re-territorialized entities which often function as self-enclosed subspecies within a larger body politic.

The processes of globalization have also come to complicate traditional notions of the way diasporas come into being and alternately function within a nation-state. As Arjun Appudurai states, globalization produces technological and macroeconomic networks which involve an interconnected and dynamic flow of electronic media networks, human patterns of migration and travel, technology, financial transfers, and ideologies.<sup>6</sup> One might say, then, that diasporas participate in, are affected by and are sometimes even produced by globalizing practices which so often necessitate the mobilization of goods, capital, knowledge and, of course, people across borders and time-zones.

Even for long-established diasporas, therefore, a technologically-driven, globalized economy (not to mention a cyber era) has altered the relationship between the country of settlement and the motherland by making more readily accessible a wider, cross-continental flow of cultural exchange. In this sense, the descendants of older diasporic communities are often less acutely disconnected from the homeland than their ancestors, given both the facilitation of frequent travel across vast distances and the dissemination of information, news and cultural products without the requisite "return home."

Having said this, however, it is important to clarify that such channels of communication are dependent on numerous other factors, such as the politics of gender, levels of education and affluence, fluency in the mother tongue, rural or urban residency, etc. Moreover, since diasporas often foreground distinct ethnic identities and culturally plural societies, diasporas can also be seen to function as sites

of resistance to the homogenizing and hegemonic economic and cultural practices of globalization as they are disseminated in multinational corporations and transnational institutions.

Anthropologists have traditionally viewed diasporas as an oppositional tension between an authentic past and an inauthentic present. In other words, the homeland is branded as a static, monolithic and ahistorical entity while the diasporic location is conceptualized as the site of ontological fracture and instability. This vision of diaspora has since been refuted, given its obvious deference to an essentialist view of cultures and cultural identity. For instance, James Clifford proposes an alternate paradigm--that of "travelling cultures"--in which societies are found to be in perpetual motion. The image of travel underlines the extent to which all cultures are subject to complex cross-currents of influence which combine to produce "a processual configuration of historically given elements—including race, culture, class, gender, and sexuality—different combinations of which may be features in different conjunctures" ("Travelling Cultures" 116).

In resisting an essentialist view of cultural identity, a more recent school of anthropological inquiry presupposes the "already hybridized" nature of both the diasporic subject's "mother country" (i.e., his/her originary culture) and "country of settlement" (i.e., his/her diasporic location). In their introduction to *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*, Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg correctly suggest:

'Diaspora' refers to the doubled relationship or dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places – their connection to the space they currently occupy and their own continuing involvement with 'back home'. Diasporic populations frequently occupy no singular cultural space but are enmeshed in circuits of social,

economic, and cultural ties encompassing both the mother country and the country of settlement. [. . .] Yet many studies of borders and diasporas tend to focus on the processual shuttling of peoples and capital between two distinct territorial entities, as if these cultures were not both already hybridized. (14, 15)

Such critical re-evaluations owe much to post-structuralist critique. In exposing the discursive and infinitely open-ended nature of signification, deconstructive methods expose any such fixed and essentialist cultural codes as constructs that serve as potentially hegemonic acts of self-legitimization.

As cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall and R. Radhakrishnan point out, however, post-structuralism alone cannot account for the complex processes of diasporic identity formation. This is because diasporas give way to a politics of identity which is perhaps most acutely and self-consciously subject to the processual interplay between rupture and continuity, similarity and difference, de- and re-territorialization. Consequently, diasporas tend to reconstitute themselves in the critical juncture between ontological ambivalence and an essentializing politics of identity. In this sense, Stuart Hall offers the most compelling conceptualization of cultural identity as an on-going, transformative process within which diasporic consciousness is “positioned by” and “within” a continually unfolding tension between past and present conditions:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. [. . .]; Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (394; 402)

Hall's notion of "positionality" is one which I will use throughout this study, for I believe it accurately captures the way in which diasporas are both passive and active agents in the politics of location and identity. To this end, R. Radhakrishnan correctly affirms that only in the interpenetration of post-structural and post-colonial theories can we arrive at a better understanding of diaspora. As he suggests, the post-structuralist method does not account for the coterminous impulse of the diasporic subject not only to deconstruct and interrogate fixed notions of identity but also to engage in a self-conscious restructuring of identity in self-affirming and often militant terms, particularly when posited against discriminatory practices and racially hierarchized colonial and neo-colonial practices:

In other words, the deconstructive attitude, in conjunction with the agential politics of identity, makes it possible for movements to commit themselves simultaneously both to the task of affirming concrete projects of identity on behalf of dominated subjugated knowledges and to the utopian or long-term project of interrogating identity-as-such. (Introduction xxiii)

Thus, as a super-imposed, an arbitrarily formed or a strategically enacted "positioning" along a continually unfolding process of identity-formation, diasporas can neither be seen to infinitely elude nor find themselves irreversibly pinned down by hegemonic practices, systems and ideologies.

As far back as W.E.B. Du Bois's conceptualization of black diasporic identity as having produced a "double consciousness," it has become *de rigueur* to speak of diasporic displacement in the semantics of a binary, a hyphen or a splitting. This is an ironic attribute for a cultural phenomenon that is also seen to internally displace any such binary opposition.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, diasporas undeniably inhabit a contemporaneous time-frame which brings to view the reality of "here" with the

memories and resonances of a necessary “elsewhere” (particularly in the early stages of resettlement). In turn, this is shown to create a sense of *dis*-orientation (an intellectual and cultural ambivalence) to the systems in which diasporic peoples find themselves.

As I will show throughout this study, when prefigured as a teleological displacement, this positioning “between” timeframes and locations gives way to a critical distancing which Edward Said poetically refers to as a “scrupulous subjectivity”: “Seeing ‘the entire world as a foreign land’ makes possible the originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this *plurality of vision* gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal” (“The Mind of Winter” 55; emphasis added). Though Said contextualizes this contrapuntal awareness as the exile’s and/or transnational’s prerogative, I will illustrate that it is a recurring motif as well as a discursive strategy throughout the literatures of South Asian diasporic peoples.

Heeding Said’s call for “scrupulousness,” however, I would like to caution against an unqualified use of the paradigms of “double-ness,” “inbetweenness” and, indeed, Said’s own conception of a hyphenated subjectivity when referring to diasporic consciousness. As Said himself suggests, the exile lives not only between two places but within a “plurality of vision”; similarly, the diasporic subject pivots around a “multiply positioned identity.” For one, the diasporic subject’s positionality is further undercut and transected by such factors as gender, class, ethnicity, religion, generational differences, sexual orientations, etc., all of which necessarily alter the dynamics of diasporic experience and identity. Moreover, as “already hybridized”

entities, the “here” and “elsewhere” do not necessarily prefigure oppositional or mutually exclusive spheres, but are often enmeshed in mutually reinforcing networks of ideological and political praxis.

In extricating “diaspora” from the murky terrain of misappropriation and overgeneralization, therefore, I believe we may arrive at a more simultaneously fluid and contextualized understanding of what is nonetheless an irreducibly “human” phenomenon. Indeed, there are approximately seven million South Asians who constitute what Vijay Mishra refers to as the “old Indian Diaspora”<sup>8</sup>; that is, the descendants of people who first crossed the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic Oceans to arrive in Britain’s numerous colonies, over a century and a half ago. The descendants of this first major wave of migration are thus part of a far-reaching “diaspora,” which traces its historical impetus to the colonial infrastructure, locates its ancestral, atavistic roots in the civilizations of the Indian Subcontinent, and is more often than not reconstituted and indigenized in the “new” land.

The South Asian Diaspora accordingly warrants a homologous appreciation and awareness of the history of British Imperialism and what I have termed the “vocabulary of indenture”: namely, the semiotic and mythic nomenclature of indenture history as a shared experience of travel across the “*kala pani*” (the “black water”); the subsequent formation of the “*jahaji-bhai*” (“ship brothers” or the fraternity of fellow-travellers); transplantation and resettlement in the plantation estate “logies” or accommodations; and the daily struggles and rituals of cultural and material survival.

The push for migration during the colonial era was often driven by the dire conditions prevalent in the ancestral homeland. For instance, historians now speak of



the disruptive effects of colonial rule as a catalyst for migration, particularly for the peasantry whose livelihoods were devastated by the exploitative taxation system of the British Raj. As Hugh Tinker states, the main ports of embarkation were Madras and Karikal on the Indian Subcontinent's southern coast, and Calcutta on the northern coast. These ports of embarkation drew a largely rural, Hindu-dominated populace from the surrounding southern Malabar, Coramandel, Tamil and Telugu districts, and the northern regions of Bihar, Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. Conversely, the "post-Mutiny" era<sup>9</sup> has also been identified as a major push for migration, given the increased militarization, policing and persecution of peoples suspected of anti-colonial activity.<sup>10</sup>

Historical records and archival data indicate that Hindus constituted the overwhelming majority of the indentured labourers (eighty-six percent) who ventured overseas. Muslims comprised the minority (fourteen percent) of indentured labourers, though they generally comprised a large percentage of "free passenger" migrants. Punjabis--a major ethnic group from a region which now straddles India and Pakistan--who went to the colonies usually did so as policemen or as military officers rather than as agricultural labourers. However, Punjabis were the first South Asians to have emigrated to the United States (as early as the 1820s) and to Canada (by the turn of the twentieth century), where they found employment as agricultural labourers.

Archival data also indicate that the majority of indentured labourers (both male and female) were lower caste Hindus (including "untouchables"), while "16 percent belonged to upper castes, 32 percent to agricultural castes" (Narayan 5). The high percentage of lower caste Hindus has led historians to speculate that emigration may have presented itself as an opportunity to escape the rigid hierarchies and

occupational structures of the Caste system. Cultural historians suggest that many of the single women (particularly those of lower castes) to have emigrated during this time did so to escape the sexual and other abuses of the *zamindari* (the local feudal system), or to elude the punitive consequences of acts deemed by the Hindu orthodoxy as sexually or socially transgressive. However, historians are equally quick to point out that the female subaltern migrant's position as a conspicuous minority in a predominantly male demographic of migrant workers, together with the grossly exploitative conditions of plantation life and colonial rule, often subjected her to even harsher forms of abuse than those she might have sought to escape.

Given the centrality of religious identification throughout the history of South Asian civilizations, religious delineations were not only carried over in the process of migration but were often determining factors in the process of resettlement and acculturation overseas. In fact, rooted as the majority of indentured peoples are in religious tenets and customs, their literatures speak as much of a cultural identity that is grounded in a distinctly Hindu ethos as of a "South Asian" diasporic consciousness. By extension, the South Asian diaspora can itself be examined in terms of its multiple sites of religious identification, primarily those of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.

Even though religious identification is central to South Asian diasporic consciousness as a whole, the diaspora itself should not be classified in the traditional or biblical sense of a religiously-allied group undergoing persecution or exile. Rather, as the continued centrality of religious identification might suggest, the South Asian diaspora affirms a strong collective identity that is rarely articulated in the semantics of a de-tribalized, de-centred or de-territorialized consciousness. On the contrary,

diasporic South Asians generally form tight-knit ethnic and, most notably, religious enclaves with strong social structures, endogamous relations and cultural traditions which help preserve a deeply rooted sense of community. These communities should not be mistaken, in turn, as unitary or homogeneous but as dynamic, highly stratified and often contentious alliances, internally divided by such factors as religion, caste, language, gender differences, generational differences, political ideology, nationalistic feeling and the orientation to the host society itself.

It is also important to keep in mind that the first wave of South Asian diasporic peoples has undergone a major historical shift in the transition from a colonial to a post-colonial era. As all of the regions under study will reveal, the era of decolonization drastically reconfigured the diasporic community's positioning within nascent post-colonial states. Where indigenous communities were present, South Asian peoples often found themselves precariously positioned between anti-colonial and nativist discourses. The *en masse* expulsion of South Asians from Uganda under the notorious edict of Idi Amin is the most overt manifestation of such internal racial and political tensions.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the radical diminishment of South Asian diasporic populations in the entire East African region<sup>12</sup> in a post-independence era underscores the volatile position of diasporic populations in the process of nation-building. The continuing tensions between Fiji's indigenous and Indo-Fijian populations offers yet another example of the tenuous fate of this diaspora when its members are pitted against a nativist discourse.

In the island communities of the Caribbean and Mascarene Archipelagos, demographics have also played a major role in nationalist formations: for example, the majority South Asian diasporic population of Mauritius has been at the political

helm since the country's independence. In contrast, where Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean populations share a near-majority status, such as Guyana and Trinidad, there continues to be an uneasy tension when ethnicity is deployed as a political calling card. Finally, where South Asian diasporic populations constitute a minority or share a minority position with other ethnically delineated groups, one might imagine their political subsumation by the dominant culture. This seems particularly true where political power is racially hierarchized, such as South Africa. It seems equally true of minority communities in the Western hemisphere.

However, a diasporic community's economic clout, political zeal and other points of identification beyond those of ethnicity or race, create a very different kind of political dynamics within a given national context. For instance, Malaysia's Muslim-South Asian community has secured its place within the Malay-dominated Islamic Republic with far less cultural anxiety than its more numerous Hindu counterpart. Or, in the neighbouring pluricultural context of Singapore, the Tamil community is afforded linguistic, religious and cultural autonomy albeit within a highly policed state governed by a largely Sino-Singaporean majority.

Given the ongoing economic and political instability of many post-colonial states, it stands to reason that diasporic experience has often resulted in subsequent migrations to other destinations, particularly to the Western Hemisphere. In fact, since the mid-twentieth century, South Asian diasporic populations can be said to have merged with their native South Asian counterparts in forming the second major wave of migration. Today, then, South Asian diasporic peoples might migrate from and to any number of diasporic locations worldwide. When they do so, they migrate

not only as Sri Lankans or Bangladeshis but also as Trinidadians or Tanzanians (to name only a few examples).

Ironically, then, for the second or third generation diasporic subject living in the West, the mother country usually signifies the historic country of settlement rather than the originary culture (that is, the Indian Subcontinent). Subsequently, South Asian diasporic writers identify the site of return not as the originary culture but as the country of settlement most recently left behind. Whether they have remained in their countries of birth or engaged in subsequent migrations to the Western Hemisphere, however, the descendants of this early wave of migration continue to manifest the quintessential characteristics of a “diaspora” and a concomitant “diasporic consciousness” that is grounded in a cross-cultural and trans-historical network of identification.

Mira Nair’s film *Mississippi Masala*<sup>13</sup> is a wonderful example of this trend. Here, a Ugandan of South Asian origins living out his exile in the United States yearns to reclaim his “home” in his beloved Uganda, a thematic that is echoed in exiled Ugandan author Peter Nazareth’s novels. Similarly, even for those peoples who are not forcibly exiled from their homelands, the subsequent migration westward (be it temporary or permanent) is shown to be an unfortunate economic, political and/or social necessity rather than a much-anticipated journey to the western metropolis. Thus, diasporic peoples can be seen to occupy multiple territorial and national spaces in which the very concept of “origins” and “home/homeland” becomes a highly individuated process of association and affiliation that is predicated on personal as well as collective history.

When we speak of diasporic South Asians today, therefore, we are referring to a people--be they descendants of the earliest diasporic communities or part of more recent migrations--who now occupy a common position away from the Indian Subcontinent; a distance that is experienced, to differing degrees, in geographic, national, linguistic, political, socioeconomic, ethno-cultural, religious and gendered terms. Of course, the diversity and complexity of South Asian identity can be traced to the Indian Subcontinent itself, a densely populated region whose cultural fabric is as ancient as it is changing, and as cohesive as it is fragmented. On the other hand, South Asian identity continues to be shaped by geopolitical and cultural contexts which stretch from East to South Africa, West to South East Asia, the Caribbean Region, North America, Europe, Australia, as well as the islands of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Rim.

The South Asian diaspora can thus be seen as the most extreme manifestation of the Indian Subcontinent as a crossroads of intercultural exchange and an often daunting diversity. To this end, Toronto-based diasporic writer M.G. Vassanji suggests: "The term *South Asian* [. . .] does not represent a single stand, a single outlook or concern in political, cultural or literary matters. [. . .] *South Asian* is then perhaps a term best used as one of *contrast*" (Introduction 4).<sup>14</sup>

To date, theorizations of the African Diaspora have offered the most widely applicable hermeneutics of diasporic consciousness and experience. This is particularly true of its applicability to the South Asian Diaspora, considering each group's inextricable relationship to European Imperial history. To this end, I will repeatedly turn to theorizations of the African Diaspora (particularly in my discussions of the former island plantation colonies of Mauritius and the Caribbean),

set forth by such critics as Stuart Hall and Edouard Glissant. In doing so, however, I will simultaneously illustrate that the African Diaspora should not become a master trope (even for those diasporas which grew out of or intersected its historical vector), in much the same way that “diaspora” should not stand in as a “‘figure’ for modern complex or positional identities” (Clifford, *Routes* 266).

Indeed, the South Asian Diaspora and its imaginative landscape must be mapped along the course of its own particular trajectories. To this end, I am greatly indebted to Vijay Mishra’s theorization of the “Indian Diaspora” in his two seminal articles “The Diasporic Imaginary: theorizing the Indian diaspora” and “(B)ordering Naipaul: Indenture History and Diasporic Poetics.” Though Mishra is only concerned with the descendants of indentured labourers in former plantation colonies, his theorization is the first of its kind to consider the South Asian Diaspora as having engendered a particular kind of “imaginary,” complete with its own set of tropes, thematics and structural determinants. Drawing on Lacan’s model of the “imaginary”<sup>15</sup> as a projected self-image (of what we would like ourselves to be), Mishra states:

The diasporic imaginary is a term I use to refer to any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously or unconsciously or because of the political self-interest of a racialized nation-state, as a group that lives in displacement. [. . .] Racist narratives of homelands are therefore part of the dynamics of diasporas, as imaginary homelands are constructed from the space of distance to compensate for a loss occasioned by an unspeakable trauma. (“The Diasporic Imaginary” 423-4)

Though Mishra tends to over-emphasize the “traumatic” underpinnings of the South Asian diaspora (one which precludes the diverse factors that gave rise to South Asian migration during the colonial era, including the element of “choice”), the

novels under study confirm his assertion that this diaspora has often resorted to what he calls “racist fictions of purity” (423) in a compensatory drive to transplant and recuperate the motherland (the object of loss). This view of the South Asian diaspora immediately undercuts the post-modern conceptualization of diasporas as an all-encompassing symbol of late modernity.

Mishra’s suggestion that the “old Indian diaspora” had a proclivity towards “ethnic absolutism” (424) or reconstituted itself as sites of “exclusivism” (“(B)ordering Naipaul” 190), also confirms James Clifford’s notion that diasporas often retreat within a self-protective space in response to the discriminatory, assimilationist or essentializing gaze of the other. It further points to Stuart Hall’s conceptualization of the diasporic “imaginary” as the projection of the past through the realm of representation and symbolism—an act of “desire, memory, myth, search, discovery” (“Cultural Identity” 402)—given the impossibility of an actual “return.”

Mishra rightly states that “the effects of indenture history are part of the internal structure” (“(B)ordering Naipaul” 215) of the diasporic text. Moreover, it cannot be denied that loss and the incumbent methods of cultural and material survival in a foreign and often hostile environment are part and parcel of the diasporic text’s thematic concerns. However, it would be a gross oversimplification to suggest that South Asian diasporic peoples have continued to remain stuck within a “fantasy structure” which seeks to reproduce the homeland in the insurance of cultural survival.

Indeed, Mishra’s view of the “old Indian Diaspora” is posited within an atemporal lens that overlooks generational differences; moreover, his decision to



speaking only of the “old Indian diasporas of the sugar plantations” at the expense of other regions (such as South East Asia and East Africa) and of those who came “in the wake of indenture” (“The Diasporic Imaginary” 427) precludes a broader geographic, historical and demographic range of diasporic experience, even as it pertains to what I have termed the first wave of migration (Mishra’s “old Indian diaspora”).

A static or homogenizing view of South Asian diasporic writing thus not only reigns in the on-going creative output of the South Asian diaspora, but it also denies diasporic writers and critics a wider forum of cross-cultural engagement. The formidable reputation of the recent Nobel Prize recipient, V.S. Naipaul, at the expense of other diasporic writers offers perhaps the most recognizable case in point. Mishra rightly suggests that Naipaul’s Indo-Caribbean novels have laid the structural and aesthetic cornerstone of a diasporic poetics that is grounded in indenture history. However, it is important to examine Naipaul’s diasporic poetics in relation to his contemporaries as well as a younger generation of writers to fully apprehend diasporic experience as both context-specific and “a processual configuration of historically given elements.”

For instance, in Deepchand Beeharry’s novels, diasporic experience rarely capitulates into the semantics of ontological ambivalence<sup>16</sup> which pervades Naipaul’s worldview. Though the quintessential motifs of exile and/or dislocation found in Naipaul’s oeuvre are apparent among many of the texts under study, they are usually counter-poised by a desire to belong to the new land, if not a sense of history and rootedness therein. Moreover, a younger generation of writers seem to

reconceptualize Naipaul's diasporic poetics of dispossession by turning their gaze inward to the diasporic community's own discourses of exclusion and sites of oppression--such as caste, class and gender differences--while simultaneously articulating a politics of identification with the wider pluri-ethnic body of the post-colonial nation.

Without a comparative look at the multi-generational and cross-cultural expanse of the South Asian diasporic imagination, therefore, the historically specific and simultaneously intertextual landscapes of the diasporic imagination are systematically levelled or, at the very least, glossed over. Diasporic writers themselves challenge a reductive view of a variously positioned identity that holds them hostage to a contained univocality, and stifles the dialogic relationship between each writer's "sense of unique experience and sense of collective history" (Espinete, Interview 100). Indeed, the diasporic text immediately exposes the inapplicability of current conceptual and theoretical models which rely on a handful of pre-existing paradigms or tropes, rather than account for the heterogeneous and intersecting networks of diasporic experience. This is a response that can be extended to include any such totalizing impulse which overlooks the fact that diasporic literature mirrors diasporic experience in so far as it is a relative, transformative and on-going process that is both positioned "within" and "by" the multiple transecting networks of influence and exchange in which it is enmeshed.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See Jane Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, "Nation, Migration, Globalization: Points of Contention in Diaspora Studies" in *Theorizing Diaspora*.

<sup>2</sup> See Daniel Boyarin and Jonathon Boyarin's "'Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Diaspora" in *Theorizing Diaspora*; see also Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen seems to draw on Stuart Hall's notion of hybrid cultures, since the last category refers specifically to the Caribbean as a new hybrid collective.

<sup>4</sup> See Anzaldúa's testimonial, "La Prieta" in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Anzaldúa subverts the symbol of the border as an officially policed territory in her articulation of a third space, "El Mundo Zurdo," where people are not defined by labels but by their multiple identifications and perpetual metaphorical border crossings between positions, peoples and identities.

<sup>5</sup> See Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg introductory essay, "Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity" in *Displacement, Diaspora, Geographies of Identity*.

<sup>6</sup> See Arjun Appadurai's five-part theory of globalization, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" in *Theory, Culture and Society*.

<sup>7</sup> See Braziel and Mannur.

<sup>8</sup> This statistic has been taken from Vijay Mishra's "(B)ordering Naipaul: Indenture History and Diasporic Poetics," p. 228.

<sup>9</sup> The South Asian officers and personnel of the British Colonial Military rebelled against the British Raj in 1857. British historians continue to refer to this event as a Mutiny, while South Asian historians refer to it as anti-colonial resistance.

<sup>10</sup> See David Northrup. This phenomenon is explored in my chapter on Mauritius.

<sup>11</sup> On November 5, 1972, Uganda's most notorious President, Idi Amin, called for the expulsion of all South Asians from Uganda. Idi Amin's edict was an extreme manifestation of prevalent African-South Asian tensions in post-colonial East African nations.

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<sup>12</sup> After several thousand years of a Muslim South Asian presence in East Africa, the population of South Asians in Tanzania has dwindled to .17 % in a post-independence era.

<sup>13</sup> See Mira Nair's 1992 film *Mississippi Masala*.

<sup>14</sup> M.G. Vassanji is a wonderful example of the multiply positioned diasporic writer. He was born in Kenya, grew up in Tanzania and migrated to Canada where he launched his literary career.

<sup>15</sup> I believe Mishra duplicates Stuart Hall's use of Lacan's concept of the "imaginary" in his own discussion of diasporic identity. See Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," p.402.

<sup>16</sup> See Vijay Mishra's compelling theorization of Naipaul's novels as "diasporic allegories" in "(B)ordering Naipaul: Indenture History and Diasporic Poetics" in *Diaspora*.

## **PART II - Africa**

## **Chapter 2 - Mauritius**

**The Foundational History of Indenture in Deepchand Beeharry's  
*That Others Might Live*: "abandoned imperial barracoon"  
or the epic imaginary of a new diasporic odyssey?**

As a post-colonial island nation<sup>1</sup> that continues to produce the bulk of its literature in French, Mauritius occupies an ambiguous position in a study devoted to South Asian Diasporic Literature in English. However, as the first sugar colony to receive the largest number of South Asian immigrants in a post-emancipation era, Mauritius stands at the epicentre of indenture history, a history that permeates the imaginative landscape of the majority of South Asian diasporic peoples. Consequently, Indo-Mauritian history epitomizes the central tropes of the South Asian diaspora: namely, the systemization of indentured labour; the process of transplantation and settlement; the oppositional currents of creolization and cultural exclusivism; anti-colonial resistance and the post-colonial state; the push and pull of subsequent migrations; and the multiply positioned identity of the diasporic subject.

The two other regions under study to have received a similar flood of indentured labourers--namely, South East Asia and the Caribbean--have necessarily borne witness to all of the above phenomena. Indeed, as I will illustrate, many of the theoretical paradigms which pertain to the Caribbean archipelago are strikingly applicable to the Mascarene islands, given each region's imperial history as plantation economies which relied exclusively on the enforced and voluntary labour of its geographically dispersed colonial subjects. Yet Mauritius occupies a unique position in the history of Britain's former colonies, not merely as the progenitor of indenture history, but also given the fact that the island was uninhabited prior to

colonization. It is thus itself a creation of those historical forces which, among other things, first brought South Asian peoples to its pristine shores.

In his foundational study of the history of indentured labour, Hugh Tinker states, "The main movement of indentured emigration took place in the years before 1880. Mauritius was the great consumer, and by 1871, the population was composed of 216, 258 Indians and 99,784 Creoles, mainly of African origin" (*A New System of Slavery* 56).<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to imagine the rapid accumulation of "the overseas wealth of Britain" (Preface xiii) in a post-emancipation economy without the blood, sweat and tears of the South Asian and Chinese labour force alike. As Britain's first major sugar colony, therefore, one might say that Mauritius's natural and human resources literally and figuratively sweetened the Englishman's tea.

Prior to 1842, the exportation of labour mainly from the northern and southern regions of the Subcontinent<sup>3</sup> was an unregulated trade that bore an unsettling resemblance to slavery. But as "the first of the plantation colonies to import contract workers from India" (Carter 6) in unprecedented numbers, Mauritius soon became the primary site in which the labourers' working and living conditions necessitated reform, as much in the interest of India-British relations as in the upkeep of agricultural productivity. On the one hand, the systemization of labour resulted in a more strictly legislated and principled administration of an otherwise haphazard trade; on the other hand, it merely facilitated in greater numbers the supply of workers who continued to be regarded as "units of production, not people" (Tinker 38). Mauritius nevertheless constituted an originary site, for it furnished a systematic blueprint for plantation societies in the Caribbean, the Pacific Rim and the African



continent. However, as Deepchand C. Beeharry illustrates in *That Others Might Live* (1979),<sup>4</sup> a sociohistorical novel that retells this history from the perspective of the indentured labourer, the indenture system should not be seen as a preconceived model superimposed on Mauritian soil, but as one which emerged out of the collective experience and plight of diasporic peoples therein.

Mauritius has figuratively functioned as a geopolitical *tabula rasa*, etched with the ebb and flow of human history; conversely, the island has been misleadingly subsumed by the imperialistic or touristic gaze.<sup>5</sup> Mauritius has thus been written into being by passers-by who witnessed in the island little more than a relic of seafaring or plantation history. Hence, the unrivalled canonization of the eighteenth century writer/philosopher Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*, a romanticized account of a legendary shipwreck off the island's coast.<sup>6</sup> Several hundred years later, V.S. Naipaul recorded his impressions of the then fledgling post-colonial state not as a place of character and substance but as a vacuous site of "disaster": "[. . .] an agricultural colony, *created by empire in an empty island* and always meant to be part of something larger, now given a thing called independence and set adrift, an *abandoned imperial barracoon*, incapable of economic or cultural economy" ("The Overcrowded Barracoon" 292; emphasis added).<sup>7</sup>

Naipaul's metaphor of the "abandoned imperial barracoon" evokes Mauritius's muted past prior to its three hundred odd years of French and British occupation. However, Naipaul's view of the island's signification as little more than a vestige of Empire warrants scrutiny insofar as it reinscribes a tradition of European travel writing which sought to "encode and legitimate" (Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 5) the

hegemonic imperatives of European expansion. Naipaul's reading of Mauritius thus adopts a hierarchical, Eurocentric dialectic that "blinds itself to the way in which the periphery determines the metropolis" (6), or, in a post-colonial context, denies self-determination. At worst, such a reading of island societies in particular is formulated in tropes of isolationism and premodernity; at best, it revisits these societies "as 'museums' for tourism, anthropological inquiry, or sociological praxis" (Deloughery, "The 'litany of islands'" 24).

In other words, though Naipaul paints a credible portrait of the island's growing overpopulation and underemployment, this is nevertheless an unredeeming account of a purportedly helpless people who are not only perceived as the victims of history but of their own inescapable deficiencies as secluded island dwellers, disconnected from the pulse of industry and progress. While Naipaul admirably desists from succumbing to edenic projections of a tropical island-paradise, he perpetuates instead a dystopic paradigm of post-colonial island societies as squalid, deficient replicas of their imperial founders. Thus, Mauritius becomes an "empty" signifier or "repeating island"<sup>8</sup> of a lifeless, obsolete system; that is, "the politics of the powerless" (Naipaul 287) prostrate before the "sugar cane and sugar cane, ending in the sea" (270).

In a 1984 lecture on spatial dynamics, Foucault describes the colony as "an extreme type of heterotopia" in its creation of an illusory or compensatory "space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed and jumbled" ("Of Other Spaces" 27). According to Foucault, the heterotopia functions as an alternate space that is self-contained where "all the

other real sites within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24). As is made evident in Naipaul’s metaphor, Mauritius has invariably been conceived as an archetypal heterotopia; that is, as a static and peripheral entity that “can only signify as such when it is constructed in binary opposition to the history and geography of its continental visitors” (Deloughery 26).

However, as a primary or originary site which exerted a profound influence on the workings of the imperial machinery, Mauritius can be said to have altered the course of British history rather than to have merely served as a passive or controlled extension of the metropolis. Mauritian culture and history thus echoes other island societies in articulating an “I-land” subjectivity<sup>9</sup> that rejects the colonial mapping of such geopolitical spaces as isolated and atemporal. As such, Mauritius can be said to metaphorically function as a counter-heterotopia in revealing the extent to which the interactions of island immigration, inter-ethnic contact, hybrid discursive practices and collective agency have transformed the periphery into a virtual epicentre of historical change.

Even in more contemporary terms, then, Naipaul casts an ill-suited metaphor over a nation which, since its independence in 1968, has carved itself a singular niche within the archipelagic and continental region of which it is a part. As an officially heteroglossic and relatively harmonious pluri-ethnic/cultural community, Mauritius has charted an identity that is distinct from that of its sister-island, Réunion, as well as its neighbouring African countries. In Françoise Lionnet’s comparison of Réunion and Mauritius, the Mascarenes’ two major island societies, the former’s status as a department of France accounts in part for its continued deference to a monolithic and

“dominant symbolic system—metropolitan French culture” (“*Créolité* in the Indian Ocean” 104). In contrast, the latter is clearly accredited with “the cultural and political autonomy” that Naipaul finds lacking in Mauritian society. Given its institutionalization of multiracial policies and a more widely accepted “creole” aesthetic that opposes the racist binaries of European imperialism, Lionnet describes Mauritius as a “‘model’ post-colonial state, one that is even being hailed as a superb example of successful mediations of the uncertain relationship between nationhood and ethnic or cultural identity” (106).

The island’s pluricultural heritage is, of course, attributable as much to a number of unusual sociohistorical factors as to present conditions. For one, the island has been subject to a curiously sustained double imperial legacy. Indeed, unlike the palimpsestic succession of colonial entities during the era of European expansion, France’s cession of Mauritius to Britain in 1810 led not to the usurpation of the island by the latter but to its presence as a “temporary resident[s]” (Benedict 28) therein. For the most part the British formally administered the island but left the older French plantocracy to dominate its sociocultural infrastructure with relatively little to no interruption. Thus, one cannot really speak of an “English” community in the way it is possible to speak of the “Anglicization” of many Caribbean islands, for Mauritius belongs as much to the *francophonie* as to the Commonwealth. Having said this, it is equally significant that Mauritius’s population has been dominated by its formerly indentured peoples (since the earliest stages of their arrival), a demographic which has in turn made the Subcontinent the third sociocultural and political axis around which a relatively “Indianized” community operates.<sup>10</sup>

It is necessary to consider further these interdependent historical and cultural influences if one is to appreciate the complexity of the island-nation's literary trends. This Franco-Anglo-Indo triad has understandably produced a heteroglossic blend of linguistic and cultural relations in an otherwise relatively small nation of approximately one million residents. In fact, there is nothing simple about Mauritian identity: the majority of its citizens migrated from the Subcontinent; among its oldest residents are the descendants of slaves from Madagascar and Mozambique and, to a lesser extent, southern India<sup>11</sup>; the traditional elite are by and large of French origin; the new body politic consists of a select group of Indo-Mauritians, Franco-Mauritians and Creoles<sup>12</sup>; daily life is conducted in Kreol, the island's *lingua franca*; and the language of officialdom is English.

As Larry Bowman states, Mauritians "alone of all the fifty-plus African states have a citizenry that is fluent in both French and English" (*Mauritius: Democracy and Development* 151), but where the average citizen might be able to communicate in up to a combination of three or more languages. Each language in turn bears a particular sociohistorical register: e.g., French is invariably associated with the established elite, whereas Kreol and South Asian vernaculars are markers of ethnic identification. As such, many politicized writers of the left or of non-European origins reject French on "ideological [. . .] grounds" (Fabre 124), adopting English as the more neutral of the two imperial idioms. In contrast, Kreol is fast becoming the symbol of national culture, although there exists a counter-balancing impulse to officially maintain English, French and Hindi or Bhojpuri<sup>13</sup> in the interest of socioeconomic exchange with Asia and the West.

The English-language writer might well be faced with additional complications in a country where, as late as 1972, only 0.3 % of the population identified English as their primary language of communication.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the marketability of texts in a small economic community severely curtails the opportunity for publication, irrespective of one's linguistic preferences. English-language writing in Mauritius thus occupies a curious if not paradoxical position in Mauritian literary production. On the one hand, English-language writing is perceived as a "political statement in favour of cultural nationalism" (Fabre 123); on the other hand, it is least reflective of local parlance.

Michel Fabre asserts that most English-language writers on the island "claim they write for their people, the people of Mauritius." However, as a literary medium, English produces a complex dynamic of seeming contradictions which is most readily apparent in the deployment of English as a political statement. In other words, though the language often serves those who are opposed to the cultural elite, it betrays an inherently European literary tradition that overshadows Kreol or the numerous South Asian vernaculars that colour the island's cultural heritage.

English-language writing has also come to accrue its own set of ethnic or racial markers. As Nandini Bhautoo-Dewnarain suggests, the emergence of English-language publication prior to independence was greatly "motivated by the desire to carve a place within the establishment of literature for the *non-white* Mauritian" (21; emphasis added). Indeed, the Indo-Mauritian community is the principal proponent of English-language writing. Though this phenomenon is best left to sociolinguistic and historical inquiry, it is worth noting that the Indo-Mauritian's exposure to English

would have preceded his/her arrival in the Mascarenes, while any anti-imperial resistance to the language has been muted by an overriding reaction to French. Add to this equation the erosion of South Asian vernaculars and it is not difficult to see why the Indo-Mauritian is particularly drawn to English-language publication, despite its relative disadvantages in a majority French-speaking community. Finally, the practical appeal of English in an international literary marketplace cannot be underestimated (as is the case for all of the regions under study).

Having said this, the few scholars who have accorded this body of literature critical attention<sup>15</sup> concur with Angela Smith's (1984) conclusion that the "Indo-Mauritian writer's attitude to English is that of a borrower. He can speak English and write English—but his culture must find tones of adjustment with the language he uses to write literature" (Smith 77). Smith correctly points to the numerous obstacles which impede the quality and production of Mauritian Literature in English, such as limited distribution, readership and criticism, not to mention the precarious position of the English language itself in a predominantly French-Kreol environment. As Smith and others have noted, these numerous constraints have resulted in a long tradition of self-publication.

However, I would suggest that this is a pessimistic view of Mauritian Literature in English. As Bhautoo-Dewnarain's more recent survey of English-language writing reveals, a younger generation of Mauritian writers (of various ethnic backgrounds) are shown to have undergone a metamorphosis since the 1990s, exploring in "new overtones of irony and detachment the complexities of island existence [. . .]" (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 24). In other words, a growing investment, on

the part of British and local cultural organizations, in anthologies, literary competitions and publishing ventures has already begun to reshape the local English literary landscape.

Belonging to the first generation of English-language writers, Deepchand C. Beeharry's accomplishments surfaced well before the author could have benefited from this cultural resurgence. As one of the first writers to set his fiction within both the historical and contemporary context of his native island,<sup>16</sup> Beeharry himself repeatedly laments, in several of the Forewords of his own works, both the material and wider cultural implications of publishing constraints on the aspiring writer: "The difficulties the writer has to grapple with over here to get his books published are too well-known to bear repetition. [. . .] The cost of producing a book is still high enough to compel writers to stow away their manuscripts somewhere in their drawers. And this is the pity. For, in these hours of darkness, the presence and voice of the writer have become more than ever indispensable" (*Never Goodbye*, np). Beeharry's œuvre nonetheless stands as a testament to the complex heteroglossic context of his island identity, if not as a triumph over the numerous "financial and technical obstacles" which impede publication.

Born in Floreal, Mauritius, in 1927, Beeharry studied classical languages before earning an M.A. in English from *Viswa Bharati* (a University in India founded by Rabindranath Tagore). A true polyglot, Beeharry's literary output includes English, French and Hindi works, many of which are further interlaced with Bhojpuri and Kreol. Beeharry's active professional life includes his contributions as a journalist, teacher, member of the bar, government official and, more recently, an



independent political candidate (upon his resignation from the Labour Party). Beeharry's lifetime commitment to public service is underscored in his repeated claim that the ideal writer should combine the need for self-expression with his role as "a social critic and a guide" (Preface, np).

In fact, those thematic concerns which are closest to Beeharry's homebase--themes such as the mobilization of labour movements, inter-ethnic relations and individual agency--are indicative of an oeuvre that was conceived over a twenty-year period which straddled the ideological and political upheavals of a pre- and post-independence Mauritius. Recalling other African contemporaries such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Sembene Ousmane and Peter Nazareth whose literary careers are intellectually driven by the era of decolonization, Beeharry states: "In newly independent or under-developed countries, the writer has a special duty or care. [. . .] He is mostly against systems which ride roughshod on the dignity of the individual, and make it possible for inequality and iniquity, corruption and favouritism to dig their feet in the ground" ("Why Do I Write?" 2).<sup>17</sup>

Over the course of his literary career, Beeharry has produced five novels, several short story collections and a short play; he has also been the recipient of a British Council literary award. In their sequential literary surveys,<sup>18</sup> Michel Fabre and Danielle Quet generally agree that Beeharry is the "best Mauritian novelist in English" (Fabre 132). In spite of the author's extensive literary output, not to mention his singular position as his nation's first English-language novelist, Beeharry has won little international recognition or critical attention, even in India where he has published several of his works. This is primarily attributable, once again, to the

virtual inaccessibility of his oeuvre both on and off his native island's shores, given the afore-mentioned hurdles confronting aspiring and established Mauritian literary figures alike.

I hope that Beeharry's inclusion in this study corrects, in some small way, this lamentable oversight, for, as I will demonstrate, his oeuvre offers a compelling narrativization of the struggles and triumphs of indenture history as the structural and psychological cornerstone of his characters' lives. Though sometimes compromised by the shortcomings of poor editorship and shoddy printing, his novelistic career is nonetheless enlivened by subject matter that Fabre aptly terms as "untapped material" (129). Indeed, apart from Beeharry's Indo-Mauritian contemporary, Abhimanyu Unnuth, whose Hindi novel *Lal Pasina* (1977) fictionalizes the historic plight of Indian labourers during the nineteenth century, Beeharry's *That Others Might Live* foregrounds new thematic concerns in the history of the novel. Finally, Beeharry's transecting linguistic and cultural influences, which include French, British and Indian literary canons, together with a rich oral creole tradition, have combined to produce the distinctly multiply positioned diasporic consciousness so evident throughout his oeuvre.

Despite what might appear to the post-modern reader as a technically and stylistically conservative writer who faithfully adheres to his classical training, Beeharry ventures into wholly uncharted novelistic terrain: a) he fictionalizes the earliest stages of indenture history, beginning with the impetus for migration and the incumbent sea voyage to the colonies (with its echoes of the Middle Passage), and ending in the dehumanizing conditions of plantation labour and existence; b) he

thematizes the diasporic subject as a trope for transgressive and transformative action who is nonetheless caught in an uneasy tension between the self-reflexive impulse of a re-spatialized consciousness and an instinct for self-preservation in essentialist or purist terms; and c) he catalogues and animates the vocabulary of indenture: that is, nomenclature such as *girmitiya*, *kala pani* and *jahaji bhai* that are specific to the people who shared this unique diasporic experience.<sup>19</sup>

I have chosen to focus only on Beeharry's third novel because it serves as an exemplary introduction to what I have termed the "diasporic odyssey," a motif that arises in other texts which evoke the history of indenture.<sup>20</sup> In *That Others Might Live* (1976), Beeharry catalogues, in unprecedented detail, his ancestors' historic journey across the *kala pani* and their subsequent struggle for fair and humane treatment under British colonial rule. This sociohistorical novel thus captures the conflicting impulses with which the diasporic subject must contend: namely, the move toward a pluralistic social and political awareness that is grounded in the ethics of anti-imperial struggle or a converse retreat behind an ethnocentric and exclusivist communal ethos in the insurance of ontological stability.

Though Beeharry's didacticism often overdetermines character and plot, the author consistently aims to strike a critical balance by exposing the inequities of both colonial and Indian power structures. This can be seen in the following comparison of the subaltern's exploitation under both an inherited feudalistic, caste-bound society and an imposed imperial infrastructure: "We have not gained much, I am afraid. There it was the bondage of [the] zamindar system; here it is [the] servitude of indentured labour,' he mumbled to himself" (*TOML* 38).

Before focussing my attention on the novel at hand, however, I would like to provide a brief overview of Beeharry's œuvre, because each of these novels partakes in a diasporic poetics that implicitly resists an island subjectivity which is irreversibly shackled to either its ancestral or imperial past. As Mukherjee and Racker state, in their brief bio-bibliographic survey of Beeharry's literary career, the author's first novel "voices a number of concerns that are to assume reiterative thematic dimensions in his later literary career" (16). I believe that many of these concerns are also evident in the works of other diasporic and post-colonial writers. For instance, even though *Never Goodbye* (1965) leaves something to be desired in terms of artistic flourish, its protagonist is convincingly constructed as a diasporic subject who is no longer bound to an atavistic longing for the past but socially and spiritually fuelled by a love for the new land, even as the temptation to escape to the West is tangible if not realizable: "For months he had been busy contacting the Canadian authorities, for months he had been looking forward to the day when he would be offered a job somewhere in Montreal or Ontario. But now that the offer was there beckoning him to a new world, his mind went blank" (*Never Goodbye* 1).

It is my contention that Beeharry's first two novels *Never Goodbye* and *A Touch of Happiness* (1966) comprise thematic sequels insofar as they chart an Indo-Mauritian's emerging social and political conscience in an ailing post-War economy. Here, Beeharry faintly recalls his Barbadian counterpart, George Lamming, in exposing the effects of the World Wars on the lives of seemingly far-removed island colonies.<sup>21</sup> Beeharry's first two novels also depict the post-colonial archetype of "colonial alienation"<sup>22</sup> brought about in the imposition of a colonial education and in

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the non-European subject's journey "westward" as a requisite vehicle for upward social mobility. Here, one immediately thinks of V.S. Naipaul's *Mimic Men*, though it is an archetype that is also repeated in the works of a more recent generation of diasporic writers such as Lakshmi Persaud and K.S. Maniam.<sup>23</sup> As I have already mentioned, all of the above post-colonial preoccupations are necessarily also echoed in the works of Beeharry's African contemporaries.

Although their settings diverge by a century, Beeharry's fourth novel *Three Women and a President* (1979) mirrors *That Others Might Live* insofar as it fictionalizes another turning point in Mauritian annals. Here, Beeharry reconstructs the events of the OAU (Organization of African Unity) Conference held in Mauritius in 1976.<sup>24</sup> The novel highlights throughout the Mauritian government's attempt to forge stronger alliances with its African neighbours while trying to maintain its anti-apartheid stance against its major trading partner, South Africa. Pivoting these events around an Indian Secret Agent's mission to subvert a plot to assassinate the conference's most controversial delegate, the Ugandan President Idi Amin, Beeharry simultaneously reveals his sympathies for the exiled Ugandan-South Asian and his interest in the role of India, his ancestral homeland, in Mauritian/African politics.<sup>25</sup>

The novel is a departure from the author's usual brand of social realism in its ribald portrayal of the Secret Agent's voracious sexual appetite. However, Agent "XXX 13" comes across as a puerile version of James Bond rather than as a solid character. Beeharry's protagonist (however comically intended) sadly compromises a novel that otherwise wrestles itself free of sexist stereotypes in the unselfconscious foregrounding (hence the title) of three female characters—an African, an Indian and

a European—who function as key operatives in the goings-on of political espionage, intelligence gathering and revolutionary activity. In fact, most of Beeharry's female protagonists combine to create a feminist ethos that simultaneously envisions women (regardless of their ethnicity or race) as political, cultural and intellectual agents of change, while also realistically portraying their common subjection to chauvinistic ideals.

In *Heart and Soul* (1983), Beeharry's last and most philosophical novel (to date), the author attempts to break out of the stylistic straight-jacket of his former novels. Here one finds the recurring motif of cultural alienation in the western metropolis that is so often addressed in "immigrant novels." Set in London during the years preceding Mauritian Independence, the novel critiques neoimperial practices, both in terms of British-Mauritius relations and for the racial minority. Recalling Samuel Selvon's *Lonely Londoners*, Beeharry attacks, with unflinching candor, the exploitation of foreign workers abroad, and the pervasive suspicion directed at people of colour. Yet, with a characteristically even hand, Beeharry dismantles racial barriers in his portraits of a German *au pair* with whom the protagonist Rishi falls in love, and a Madagascan journalist/activist of French ancestry. Together, these characters form an inter-racial alliance of intellectual, political and spiritual solidarity.

Ironically, it is through his German girlfriend's moving descriptions of her family's disintegration in Nazi Germany and her subsequent spiritual awakening in India, together with his own growing discontent as a racial minority, that Rishi comes to the realization that effective activism must be driven by the "heart and soul" rather than reactionary behaviour or the salving of conscience. For Rishi, this inevitably

involves a return to his place of birth with a new vision for its development, one which rejects an uncritical drive for technological and economic self-determination without a concomitant application of humanitarian principles. Though characterization is often driven by sentimental idealism, this is a moving and redeeming culmination of the author's commitment to stressing "the need for harmony and understanding" (Foreword) in an ever-changing and increasingly militarized world.

Though there is much to commend Beeharry's corpus, *That Others Might Live* (the novel that is situated in the proverbial "heart and soul" of his oeuvre) clearly stands out as his most compelling work for it is here that the author breaks narrative ground. As Vijay Mishra writes, in his theorization of the Indian Diaspora, there is "no subaltern Marlow who has recounted the first encounter with these outposts of Empire, even though scattered and oral accounts of the indentured labourers have survived in folk stories and songs. All that remained was the memory of the passage and a loss that could only be sustained through the categories of myth" ("Diasporic Imaginary" 429). Mishra's suggestion that the history of indentured labour, particularly at its earliest stages, does not seem to exist beyond scant "documentary archive[s]" (429), oral tradition and collective memory, lends considerable weight to *That Others Might Live*, given its contribution to the genre of the historical novel as well as its primary place in the literary history of South Asian diasporic peoples.

As I will show in subsequent chapters, indenture history is encoded in the South Asian diasporic writers' texts as "mediatized aesthetic renditions of the experience of the old Indian diaspora" (Mishra, "(B)ordering Naipaul" 215). In other



words, it is usually imagined through a narrative perspective that is now several generations removed from the initial crossing overseas. As such, it is filtered through individual and collective memory, but it is rarely the prime mover of character and plot. In contrast, *That Others Might Live* attempts to realistically chronicle the “tale of the tribe.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the author seeks to capture, with documentary realism, the emergence of a new way of life for a community of displaced peoples. Though Arthur Pollard suggests (in the only existing review devoted to *That Others Might Live*), that this is a sociohistorical novel in the classic sense,<sup>27</sup> I believe that Beeharry invests at least the potential for heroic depth in his characters and a touch of mythic resonance in place and events. In fact, the epic intent is clear in the didactic drift of the title: this is, in fact, a story that “must” be told not only to ensure the survival of the people but also to reclaim their pivotal role in History.

It is indeed significant that the first novel to be discussed in this study assumes epic proportions. In fact, as an Indo-Mauritian writer who has dedicated his literary career to telling the tale of this first and oldest community of indentured labourers, Kipling’s persona of the man with “the necessary word” (quoted in Bernstein, 8) befits Beeharry’s own literary ambitions. Having said this, it is important to note that Beeharry’s undertaking reverberates as much with his Hindu upbringing as with his western classical training. Indeed, the epic tales of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabaratha* surface through each of his novels, connecting even his most existential protagonists to a primordial past, one that is imbued with the spirits of Hindu gods and goddesses, and the ancient rituals, practices and beliefs invoked in their ubiquitous presence. For Beeharry, therefore, there is little dissonance between the realistic, material rendition

of the tale and in the endowment of character, place and theme with “the common aspirations, ethical beliefs and unifying myths of a people” (Bernstein 8).

In *That Others Might Live*, the documentation of human deeds naturally inspires the coterminous transcription of the values they generate. This heretofore undocumented tale thus elicits the totality of the diasporic odyssey across the radically shifting codes of the migrants’ physical, material, political and cultural circumstances. In depicting the indentured labourers’ historic beginnings, therefore, Beeharry simultaneously records and commemorates the emergence of a new collective consciousness which sets forth the common destiny of a people who seek to spiritually and materially transcend past and present limitations.

Beeharry vividly captures the dialogic process of “becoming” and “being” (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 392) that defines the indentured labourer’s odyssey: namely, the numerous factors that contributed to the push for migration; the ship and “barracoon” at the ports of embarkation and disembarkation as dehumanizing sites; the plantation as a system of bondage; the stirrings of rebellion; the subaltern woman’s double colonization by patriarchal and colonial hegemonies; the (re)formation of community among a variously stratified group; the simultaneous preservation and creolization of cultural artifacts, values, languages and ideas; the (re)conception of old and new mythologies as a gesture of “settlement” in an otherwise alien landscape; the migrant’s physical and psychic displacement; and, finally, the real and imagined journeys “home.”

To highlight the protean nature of diasporic experience, perhaps, the novel is constructed as a circular narrative which symbolically begins and ends in the liminal space of the ship, one of the unifying symbols of indenture history:

The ship had left Calcutta late in the evening, the day before, with a cargo of cattle, rice and *some three hundred immigrants of whom more than half were men*. The rest were women and children. [. . .] They were a *motley crowd* of workers, who still carried in their eyes the dreams of a *land of milk, honey and gold*, promised to them by the recruiting agents [. . .]; a life of privations, mingled with a sense of adventure, had thrown them together on the transport ship, the *Ganges*, on its way to Mauritius. (TOML 9-10; 16; emphasis added)

In these opening pages, Beeharry underlines both the conditions and motivations of indenture experience: that is, the migrants are valued as little more than the cattle whose cargo space they share, while their reasons for migration are as varied and complex as their backgrounds. Moreover, the symbolically named ship, the *Ganges*, introduces the mythic proportions of the act of faith that such a journey into the unknown surely must have entailed.

Though I do not wish to overstate the comparison between slavery and indenture, it is interesting to note how the ship, which Paul Gilroy aptly defines as a “living microcultural, micropolitical system in motion” (“The Black Atlantic” 62), brought indentured peoples of different backgrounds together in unprecedented proximity as it did for the African slaves of the Middle Passage. As Vijay Mishra suggests, the ship functions as a recurring trope across the “social imaginary” (“(B)ordering Naipaul” 196) of indentured peoples:

The ship, the medium of mercantile capitalism and of the (middle) passages of both slavery and indenture, is the first of the cultural units in which social relations are re-sited and renegotiated. [. . .] Social interactions during these lengthy voyages began a process that led to the remaking of cultural and ethnic identities, to a critical self-

reflexivity of the kind missing from the stratified and less mobile institutions of the homeland. (195)

The impetus for the journey simultaneously recalls and overturns other colonial quest narratives, such as the search for “el dorado” (the land of “gold”). Similarly, this mass exodus is likened to religious or pioneer narratives, as the allusion to the promised land (“the land of milk and honey”) suggests. In other words, here the quest motif applies as much to the sentiments of the colonized passengers as to the crew, while the illusory or deceptive nature of the voyage, at least during the earliest stages of indenture, is exposed as an apparatus of mismanagement, self-interest and corruption. Indeed, as Beeharry illustrates, many of the initial shiploads of migrants had been coerced or tricked into undertaking a potentially fatal voyage riddled with malnutrition, disease and overcrowding; a voyage that was designed to facilitate the *en masse* recruitment of people to work under appalling conditions.

The symbolic import of the ship, the water and the sea as sites not only of flux but also of a counter-discourse of cultural and political reconfiguration is mirrored in the literary and theoretical works of Afro-Caribbean peoples.<sup>28</sup> As Elizabeth Deloughery notes, “[. . .] watery trajectories provide an apt metaphor for ethnicities ‘in flux’” (41). However, post-modern Caribbean theorists such as Antonio Benitez-Rojo tend to overstate the extent to which cultural hybridity somehow “sublimate[s] [the] violence” (*The Repeating Island* 20) of plantation history. Though Benitez-Rojo and other Caribbean theorists offer a widely applicable hermeneutics of the sea as a metaphor for the fractal enactment of transculturation, one must necessarily caution against a reading of interstitial oceanic space as unproblematically symbolic of

syncretic cultural transactions that subvert the hegemonic narrative of imperialism. On the contrary, the inter-related tropes of the ship, the water and the sea embody a paradoxical poetics that simultaneously prefigures paradigms of syncretism and flux as it serves as a permanent signifier of the legacies of bondage, uprooting and loss inherent in the journey “across.”

In *That Others Might Live* the tension between two seemingly oppositional currents--i.e., that of continuity and change--is made evident in the “passage” towards the unknown. True to historical record, Beeharry describes the cramped spaces of the lower decks which the majority of passengers were forced to inhabit, irrespective of their caste and gender differences:

After the strenuous preliminaries of embarkation [. . .] they were caught between the gauntlet of customs officials and the iron glove of a weather-beaten crew. They just managed to creep up the gangway to the lower deck where charpoys or wooden beds had been placed so close to one another that they had to jump over to reach them. The beds were some two feet high and had neither mattress nor bed-stead. (TOML 16)

On the one hand, therefore, the voyage is portrayed as a liminal space in which a linguistically, religiously and ethnically diverse group undergoes considerable ontological disruption. On the other hand, these passengers are transported “into another state or place”<sup>29</sup> through a new ethos of identification in which linguistic, ethnic, religious, caste and other differences and rivalries are at least momentarily suspended in a new kind of “commonality”. In other words, as identity is destabilized both in the process of transplantation and the moment of contact, there is a counter-impulse towards a transcendent fraternity, such that the passengers come together in “one whole prayer” (TOML 27).

The ship and, by extension, the sea nonetheless serve as the primary arena of identitarian reconfiguration. Hence, not only does the ship contain the “motley crowd” of the Subcontinent’s ethnic and religious diversity, but it also disturbs the highly stratified patterns of the caste system. Far from embracing their recently fractured identities, however, the passengers are shown to reconfigure themselves as a newly allied body that perceives the imperial machinery, like the *kala pani* itself, as the hostile element in a journey into the Empire’s own proverbial heart of darkness: “The waves and the winds outside were not just the elements, they were the combined forces of a powerful enemy which had to be resisted, cornered as the immigrants were” (29). This inter-religious, inter-ethnic and inter-linguistic fraternity is deftly represented in the bond formed at sea between the three young protagonists, Manish, Dhiren and Thomas, upon their first encounter:

‘My name is Manish Atwar. And what is yours.’

‘Dhiren Das.’

‘And yours, our friend from the South?’

‘Thomas Sivaramen Pillay.’

‘Good. Now we know each other’s names. We are brothers. *Jahajea bhai*, as we say in Dharharra. Being brothers we speak the same language. We speak no English except with Feringhees, all right? We swear, all three, to help each other even at the cost of our own lives, if necessary. Agreed?’ (20; emphasis added)

Here, the phenomenon of regroupment and affiliation that the protagonists represent solicits the vocabulary of indenture. “*Jahajea bhai*”--translated as “ship brothers” or, more figuratively, the “bondage of brotherhood” (Mishra “(B)ordering Naipaul” 198)--is central to a diasporic consciousness in its evocation of the labourers’ shared histories of migration across the Atlantic, Indian or Pacific Oceans. Though the journey gives rise to a more heterogeneously (re)configured group, the

bond created by this hybrid triad paradoxically exposes an exclusivist discourse which will come to predominate the labourers' cross-cultural dealings beyond the borders of the motherland. Thus, once the labourers find themselves in the plantation colonies where expressions of individual and cultural autonomy are devoured by the greater machinery of production, this sense of "common bondage" is ironically transformed into an ethics of personal and cultural survival:

The idea of the clan or community which was, momentarily smothered by powerful economic forces resurfaced to uphold cultural and religious unity. [. . .] Individual differences or dissensions, however, gave way to mutual aid and assistance [. . .]. In short, the individual sense of self-preservation sublimated into collective participation. (*TOML* 286)

Paul Gilroy's paradigm of the middle passage as an open-ended, counter-discursive site which generates "distinct modes of cultural production" ("The Black Atlantic" 64) is thereby delimited by the circular narrative of a wholly different set of diasporic peoples. As I have suggested, though the bondage of indentured labourers is often correctly defined as a "new system of slavery,"<sup>30</sup> the South Asian and African Diasporas should not be categorically conflated. To this end, Edouard Glissant provides a helpful delineation between a "transplanted" and "transferred" people. Contrasting the Jewish and African Diaspora, Glissant suggests that a collectively "transplanted" people "maintains its original nature" because it has brought with it "the methods of existence and survival, both material and spiritual, which it practiced before being uprooted" (*Caribbean Discourse* 15), whereas the "transfer (by the slave trade) of a population" (14) results in the "constantly shifting and variable process of creolization (of relationship, of relativity)."

I believe that Glissant's distinction can be applied to the South Asian and African Diaspora, respectively. Though the South Asian Diaspora resembles the African Diaspora, given its relationship to European colonial history, the voluntary nature of the labourer's journey, together with the eventual allowance for family emigration, necessarily differs from the excruciating dislocation of the African slave. Moreover, in their collective "transplantation"--one which facilitated the mobility of values, customs and traditions in the process of resettlement--the labourers together formed large enough ethnic, cultural and religious entities to "deflect or neutralize" (Mishra, "((B)ordering Naipaul" 210) the assimilative forces that they would encounter overseas, far from the security of their ancient homeland.

In the South Asian diasporic text, therefore, water/sea has a specifically symbolic role to play in its atavistic association with the *Ganges*; in its circular, fluid link between past and present; or in its spiritual potency as a purifying element. Indeed, in the daily activities of these characters' lives, it rarely arises as a metaphor for cultural or ethnic hybridity as it does in so many Afro-Caribbean texts. For instance, in *Never Goodbye*, the protagonist Ashim's eventual emigration to Montreal is counter-poised by a pre-migratory pilgrimage to a secluded lake. Ashim's pilgrimage to a symbolically self-contained, insular body of water ensures his spiritual and cultural connection to his island community. In other words, water/fluidity indicates an implicit tension (as the contrast between an open sea and an enclosed lake reveals) between the chaotic nature of an identity in flux and the steady continuum of deeply rooted beliefs that are themselves "carried across" in the process of migration.



In keeping with the epic imaginary, therefore, the bulk of the novel is dedicated not to what divides but what unites the “jahajai-bhai”: that is, the process of settlement of indentured peoples in alien and hostile surroundings. This is not to suggest that Beeharry subsumes the individual histories of his characters’ lives in the interest of romanticizing communal ties. On the contrary, the novel is structured around the lives of three principal characters: Manish, Dhiren and Thomas. These are nonetheless representative figures, given the fact that their religious, social, ethnic and regional differences are characteristic of Indo-Mauritian diversity.<sup>31</sup>

For instance, Thomas’s story is that of a minority Christian whose religious orientation affords certain privileges in the service of the Church. In fact, both Manish and Thomas’s stories strategically expose the benefits of assimilation to “Britishness” (most notably manifested in linguistic and religious terms) as far as treatment in the plantation society is concerned. Hence, Thomas is quickly engaged as a Priest’s cook, while Manish’s knowledge of English wins him the favour of European administrators as early as the sea voyage itself, where the captain sees his usefulness as an intermediary between passengers and crew. Moreover, Manish’s eventual recruitment as a lawyer’s aid stands in stark contrast to Dhiren who, in possessing neither of his co-migrants’ cultural attributes, is immediately subject to the indignities of plantation labour.

Beeharry is equally insistent that the reasons for migration were often as contingent upon the increasingly hegemonic rule of the British Raj in the Subcontinent as upon the migrant’s personal circumstances or ambitions. In this respect, the novel brings to view a rarely glimpsed aspect of indenture history:

namely, the correlation between the push for migration and the fall-out ensuing the 1857 Rebellion or “Mutiny.” As David Northrup confirms, in *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922*, the eruption of violence on both sides of the colonial divide had telling effects on migratory patterns:

Even if people’s decisions were determined largely by their personal circumstances and conditions in their locality, the influence of the Raj was certainly pervasive. The strongest case for British rule pushing people to emigrate can be seen in the correspondence between the peak in migration overseas at the end of the 1850s and the widespread disruptions associated with the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and its suppression. (66)

Tinker confirms Northrup’s assertion in suggesting that emigration peaked in the years between 1858 and 1859, not only for those seeking to flee persecution but also for those who suffered the loss of land and livelihood in the aftermath of the Rebellion.

Manish is the principal narrative consciousness through which the author explores the inextricable link between the disruptive effects of colonial rule and subsequent patterns of migration.<sup>32</sup> Manish’s migration is shown to be part of an on-going quest to find his father, a suspected mutineer who saw in Mauritius a chance to escape his imminent arrest. By the time Manish locates his father overseas, the extent to which the Rebellion has sedimented distrust between colonizer and colonized becomes abundantly clear. Realizing that Douglas Wallace, his childhood companion, has been assigned the task of locating “mutineers” in the far reaches of the colonies, Manish’s hope that their earlier friendship might kindle the latter’s sympathy for his father’s case is sadly thwarted. Beeharry makes an even stronger indictment against the punitive measures taken to curb the Rebellion in suggesting that the unduly severe

treatment of the indentured labourer abroad sprang “from a spirit of vengeance against them and their fellow countrymen in India for having mutineered against British rule there” (*TOML* 131).

Each character thus serves to individualize the labourers’ motivations for and experience of emigration. As we have seen, Manish brings to view the push for migration that was directly linked to the political and social unrest created by anti-colonial resistance in the Subcontinent itself. Dhiren, on the other hand, plays a more archetypal role as a migrant seeking better pastures. Driven by an enduring work ethic and the spiritual force of his Hindu faith, Dhiren’s plans to settle and cultivate the new land loosely recall the aspirations of those early pioneers seeking to fulfil the “American Dream.” Although Thomas’s narrative cautiously affirms the potential to actualize this dream, his example stands in ironic contrast to the majority for whom any such improvement is a gradual, hard-won and often cross-generational struggle that comes at great personal cost.

In the afore-mentioned manner, Beeharry debunks two inter-related myths regarding indentured peoples: first, that this was a homogenous, identity-less group of people with common goals, aspirations, attitudes, backgrounds and experiences; second, the view of emigration “held by some enlightened and humane observers, British and Indian” (Tinker 60), that it categorically ameliorated the migrant’s material conditions or social standing (that is, in the dissolution of caste consciousness and gender inequalities). To this end, perhaps, Beeharry’s characters reveal that the sense of fraternity forged among an otherwise diverse group of people was primarily motivated by their shared experience within an alien environment in

which “human values always mattered less than the drive for production, for exploitation”--that is, the abject conditions of plantation life.

Beeharry sets his novel in the particularly turbulent period of the 1870s, approximately forty years after the first migrant would have arrived on Mauritian soil. As Marina Carter states, in *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers, Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874*: “The year 1874 [. . .] represented a watershed in the history of indenture in Mauritius because it marked a formal recognition of the discrimination suffered by Indians and the beginning of a slow retreat and reform” (30). The narrative thus pivots around the mobilization of collective action against the apartheid-like Pass System, or Ordinance 31, which reinstituted for the planter “proprietary rights reminiscent of the pre-emancipation period” (200).

Beeharry foregrounds, in countless examples, the excessive stronghold of Ordinance 31 in restricting not only the labourers’ movements both on and off the plantation, but also those of the women and children who lived and worked among them. The penalties were immediate, humiliating and severe, as is demonstrated by Manish and Dhiren’s prolonged incarcerations without recourse to the law. In her analysis of the indenture system, Carter suggests that Ordinance 31 was designed both to capitalize on labour in such demands as a six-and-a-half day work-week, and to minimize “the potential for collective action” (199). One of the key features of Mauritian history that Beeharry brings to view, therefore, is the heroic effort of labourers like Dhiren to rouse collective action against the injustices of an inherently exploitative system, in spite of the restrictive measures of Ordinance 31.

Beeharry's timeline is thus historically significant because it marked the period in which the otherwise unregulated use of labour underwent an initial phase of reform which would evolve into a mutually binding contractual obligation.<sup>33</sup> But Beeharry rewrites (as much as he faithfully documents) the unfolding of historical events, for he infuses what has otherwise been relegated to the official margins of legislative achievement with the heretofore unsung voices and spirits of indentured peoples. Indeed, by the time Beeharry's protagonists arrive on the island, a generation of elders, such as the introspective Ghosh Babu and the tragic Ramprasad, serve as first-hand sources of the undue severity of indentured existence. Beeharry thus narrativizes indenture history as an inter-generational exchange which relied heavily on the transmission of personal testimony. For instance, the dire circumstances of Ramprasad's premature death fuel Dhiren's own momentum to fight for the physical and cultural well-being of future generations:

What had happened to Ramprasad would go on happening to all immigrants, loyal or not, because nobody, neither the Protector of immigrants checked whether medical facilities and medicine were available to the sick labourers nor did the planters grant them time off as sick leave but squeezed the maximum out of them till they could no more and gave up the ghost [. . .] he felt a wave of indignation surge inside his breast at the injustices that man could inflict on his own kind. (TOML 216-7)

Social realism and epic intent often jostle for narrative supremacy in *That Others Might Live*, whereby the former usually prevails in matters of historical accuracy while the latter tends to dominate character and political/social commentary. Thus, despite the fact that Dhiren assumes a mythic stature by the end of the novel, he is never shown to operate far from the real historical forces and influences of those around him. Indeed, Dhiren's involvement in grass roots activism--particularly his

efforts to circulate a petition against Ordinance 31--is directly influenced by the actions of Adolphe de Plevitz,<sup>34</sup> a planter of German descent who championed the labourers' struggle against "the police, the magistracy, the planters and the Protector of Immigrants alike" (Mookherji 54).

Beeharry pays homage to this historical figure for having forefronted the labourers' revolt against Ordinance 31, protestatory actions which initiated its repeal, the appointment of the British Royal Commission of 1872-1874 to investigate allegations of exploitation, and the subsequent passing of new labour laws in 1878, upon which the indenture system was eventually modelled. For this reason, perhaps, de Plevitz is primarily presented in the text as an orator whose greatest influence arises in his vociferous denouncement of the abuses of the Pass System: "The law of 1867 is not a piece of legislation; it is a sword hanging over the heads of the immigrants. It has given rise to so many abuses that, unless the Secretary of State revokes it, soon there will be more slaves in this country than free men" (*TOML* 72).

But Beeharry's depiction of de Plevitz as a figure who remains "behind" the political scene, so-to-speak, is also a subversive narrative ploy which seeks to conversely foreground the "untold" or "undocumented" role that the labourers themselves played in their own emancipation. In other words, while de Plevitz has been inscribed into Mauritian annals by earning the Governor's appellation as "the unofficial protector of the immigrants" (Mookherji 53), the same acknowledgement has eluded the labourers themselves. Beeharry thus writes against the notion that colonized peoples were perpetual objects of history rather than agents of change. Specifically, he reclaims the history of indentured peoples by foregrounding the

labourers' own resistance to their treatment as "units of production" rather than "people" or citizens.

To this end, agency is shown to manifest itself not only in the overt example of Dhiren's political activism, but also as a quiet cultural revolution in which all members of the community are involved. For example, the conscientious insurance of cultural and religious autonomy is carried out either in the form of private quotidian acts, such as the upkeep of eating habits and social customs, or in more public collective efforts, such as the construction of "Baitkas"<sup>35</sup> where people gather to faithfully re-enact ceremonial rites and practices.

Even though Beeharry's text often suffers from "an overly didactic explanation of the working of historical forces" (Fabre 129), the author rarely idealizes the labourers' inter-ethnic unity and allegiances. On the contrary, Beeharry critically addresses the extent to which intracommunal dissension hindered the efforts of reformers like Dhiren. This phenomenon is deftly captured in the figure of the *Sirdar* (the plantation foreman or supervisor, usually of the labourers' own ethnic origin). In fact, it is Dhiren's former supervisor, Sirdar Santoshi, whose own petty rivalries (and, perhaps, fears of reprisal for having permitted insubordination), result in the former's tragic death on his wedding day. Thus, even Dhiren's opening of a school to instruct local children in matters of "the Indian dialects and hygiene" (*TOML* 76), seals his reputation as "an agitator" (74) intent on jeopardizing local livelihoods. However severe such opponents are shown to be, Beeharry is equally insistent that Dhiren's greatest opposition is found in his kinsmen's sense of paralysis

in the face of a restrictive environment which denies them even the most basic freedom of mobility.

As I have mentioned, Beeharry's narratives consistently include female characters who stand as a foil to their male counterparts' struggles under a colonial or post-colonial machinery, as the case may be. In *That Others Might Live*, this feminist voice is both as powerfully realistic as it is tragically poetic, for it exposes the double colonization of the subaltern woman, both as a sexual object and in her subordinate social status. In the case of the early stages of indenture that the novel depicts, women were historically subjected to the additional peril of finding themselves among a conspicuous minority,<sup>36</sup> which made them vulnerable to various forms of exploitation. As Carter states,

after 1842, the majority of women migrating to Mauritius were not indentured as labourers and consequently their position on estates was even more insecure and their earnings and allowances more negligible than those of men. [. . .] Women who migrated singly were offered employment as domestic servants, or were married from the depot to Indian immigrants in the colony. (182)

The plight of the indentured woman is movingly portrayed in the tragic figure of Anjani. Not only is Anjani the victim of sexual exploitation (she is "rescued" from orphanhood by a French planter only to become his concubine), she is further ostracized by her own community. In fact, it is difficult not to recall the tragedy of Thomas Hardy's Tess in Anjani's character.<sup>37</sup> Like Tess, Anjani is condemned by the structures of class and patriarchy that brand her a fallen woman. Thus, despite his relative indifference to local scandals given his transient role in the community, Manish resists Anjani's overtures in the knowledge of her tainted status as a planter's mistress. Unlike Hardy's English tragic heroine, however, Anjani suffers the



additional stigma of her “Indianness” in a racially hierarchized system. As Tinker asserts, even those women who were seen as “legitimate” members of their own community (i.e., in their status as wives), were denied similar validation by the colonial infrastructure: “Indian wives did not find a recognized place in the law of Mauritius (and later of the West Indies) based upon European, Christian rules of marriage” (Tinker 88).

In the same manner in which Beeharry critiques European and South Asian forms of cultural chauvinism, he is equally careful not to ascribe racial prejudice as the exclusive domain of one or other ethnic group. To this end, the narrative includes a subtext which implicitly critiques the pervading inter-racial tensions between the South Asian and his/her Creole or Malagash<sup>38</sup> counterpart. In Anjani and Mlle Jeanne’s fate, therefore, it is clear that sexual transactions are the primary arena in which racial prejudice is most openly pronounced. Even the heroic Dhiren warrants critical scrutiny, therefore, when he instinctively attributes Jeanne’s sullied sexual reputation to her “impure” Creole ancestry. However, Dhiren’s multiply positioned diasporic identity affords a critical distancing from the power dynamics at play in the new world; in other words, he is able to juxtapose past and present realities simultaneously.

Dhiren thus develops what Edward Said terms the “scrupulous subjectivity” of the cultural and political outsider.<sup>39</sup> Finding himself able to compare and contrast Indian and European power structures, Dhiren perceives the ideological complicities and slippages inherent in each. What begins as racial and sexual mistrust thus ends as a newly acquired awareness of and sensitivity to the systemic exploitation of female

sexuality across the racial divide: “what he had seen with his own eyes on the river bank was only the toll paid by servants to the lust of their masters. After all that was quite a common thing in India. Did not the Zamindars have their own goondas who went about in the countryside picking up women for their masters?” (*TOML* 77).

As many post-colonial writers demonstrate, eastern and western patriarchal norms are complicit in their constriction of female subjectivity under a colonial framework. Echoing Gayatri Spivak’s paradigmatic subaltern woman locked within the traces of colonial and patriarchal discourse, Gayatri Gopinath suggests that “Indian immigrant masculinity attempted to reconstitute itself through the control of ‘unruly’ Indian female sexuality” (*Queer Diasporas* 141). For South Asian women, this patriarchal framework was not only reinforced by both the racial and sexual mores of a Victorian era but also carried across from Hindu strictures. For the migrant subaltern woman in particular, therefore, sexuality is a commodity to be controlled so as to ensure cultural preservation and, for the planter, to ensure agricultural “productivity.”<sup>40</sup>

Women are thus also shown to function as the transmitters of a fixed nationalist or exclusivist cultural agenda. For instance, historian Partha Chatterjee describes Indian nationalist discourse as having deployed women as the domestic purveyors of cultural survival, such that “home” is the feminine sanctum of tradition and the “world” is the masculine arena of modernity. As one might imagine, this phenomenon assumes particular resonance in the altogether alien environment of the diasporic context. There is a telling passage towards the end of the novel that makes explicit the applicability of the “home/world” dichotomy to diasporic experience:

Some of the girls felt sour about what they called the discrimination meted out to them by both the community and their elders. [. . .] [But] in rural communities, cut off from all centres of learning, threatened by natural scourges [. . .], the women were more a commodity to be safeguarded than partners in life. The time when the immigrants were to grant as much freedom to their girls as to their boys was not ripe, economic slavery still stared them in the face. [. . .] *The womenfolk especially had to wait for the return of the enlightened women like Seema to throw off their social yoke.* And, by then, it would become certainly clear to everybody that the liberation of the family from social taboos and traditions was closely linked with the economic emancipation of the community. (TOML 286; emphasis added)

Indeed, Beeharry seems keenly aware of this binary patriarchal discourse in his portrayal of Anjani's plight. Though the above passage might appear to advocate the deployment of women as the strategic vanguards of cultural stability, the Dhiren-Anjani/Manish-Seema unions that seal the narrative's romantic subtext offer a more feminist affirmation of the impossibility of attaining economic emancipation without a coterminous struggle for sexual equality.

Indeed, Anjani's eventual suicide in the wake of her grief over Dhiren's death further puts into question the extent to which the old world merits uncritical repetition in the reformulation of the new world. As Mishra accurately suggests, "diasporas offer themselves as a series of narratives, sets of metaphors with which to begin dismantling concepts of permanence as the desirable condition of being" ("(B)ordering Naipaul 226). Though Anjani's demise might seem unnecessarily tragic, her symbolic plunge into the dreaded *kala pani* on the return journey exposes the extent to which the oppositional currents of continuity and change carry particular resonance for the migrant subaltern woman. On the one hand, the future seems as self-effacing a space as the foreboding waters that transport these women as metaphoric vessels of the very customs and practices which render them subordinate

beings, both in familiar and foreign territory. On the other hand, Anjani's inability to envision a life beyond Mauritian shores crystallizes her integral place in the new world, if only as a testament to the necessity of change for incoming generations of migrant women.

Unlike Anjani's downwardly spiralling narrative, Dhiren's narrative of struggle comes full circle. Upon his arrival on the island, Dhiren garners admiration as the first labourer (with old Ramprasad's assistance) to tame the planter's bull. In an ironic twist of fate, Dhiren's final altercation with the Sirdar over the issue of his role as an agitator sets off a chain of events that culminates in Dhiren's impalement by the very bull he first tamed. By the time of Dhiren's death, however, the wheels of change have already been set in motion to ensure his legendary status as one who stood up to the forces of nature/human nature on the labourers' behalf. The ceremonial reading of the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, at Dhiren's funeral thus consecrates his integral role in his community's destiny:

Prayers were said [. . .] Dhiren had become a hero. In his lifetime he had been a labourer at the beck and call of his master. Now, dead, he was a martyr, a symbol of resistance against oppression and an example to the hundreds of immigrants following his remains and whose grim faces reflected the storm to come. (293)

As stated earlier, *That Others Might Live* is a circular narrative that begins and ends in the "open sea" (303). While the name of the incoming ship, the *Ganges*, underscores the sacred ties that bind, the departing ship, the *Maha Ranee* ("queen"), pays tribute to the power of the female spirit, alluding perhaps to the capacity for selfless and heroic acts that Anjani's narrative discloses as much as Dhiren's. Despite

Anjani's tragic fate, then, Manish and Seema's journeys "back home" at least poetically edify the links between past and present, old and new worlds.

It is also notable that Manish and Seema strike a gender equality which implicitly insures the transmission of the "tale of the tribe" from both the male and female perspective. In other words, one might well imagine Manish and Seema recounting the stories of their beloved Anjani and Dhiren with different degrees of emphasis and intention. Moreover, as "an enlightened woman," Seema's potential as a feminist force hints at the fact that Anjani's story might be told as much in the interest of reform as in the spirit of commiseration. To this end, Anjani and Dhiren's narratives underscore the epic reach of a text which "becomes instrumental in shaping the world-view of succeeding ages, so that, in the words of the tale, past *exempla* and present needs find a continuous and unbroken meeting ground" (Bernstein 9).

The narrative circularity of *That Others Might Live* appears to project a distinctly Hindu ethos of the potential for rebirth toward more elevated states of consciousness and being, as the spiritual connotations of the concluding image optimistically suggest: "Far away the signal mountain and summits of the Moka Range, towering high over the town, stood serene and peaceful under a canopy of gloss white clouds and of blue heavens" (304). Despite its circularity, then, the text resists narrative repetition, for it bears the lessons of history while affirming that even the most seemingly helpless figures carry the potential for transformative action. In this respect, the diasporic subject's seemingly commonplace struggle for survival is itself an intrinsically heroic act. Beeharry's characters thus set the stage for an epic imaginary that is grounded in diasporic experience as an ongoing quest to triumph

over both the external and self-imposed limitations of the human condition. *That Others Might Live* deconstructs the archival view of indentured labourers as passive receptacles of History, thereby rejecting in turn a reading of Mauritian society as a derelict “barracoon,” indelibly overshadowed by the “lifeless system” of the imperial machine.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Mauritius is one of two major islands in the Mascarene Archipelago situated in the southwestern Indian Ocean, off the East African coast. The other major island is Ile de la Reunion which is still a department of France. The two smaller islands are Rodrigues and Diego Garcia. The archipelago was named after Pero Mascarenhas (the Portuguese navigator who discovered present-day Reunion). Mauritius gained its independence in 1968, after approximately one hundred and fifty years of British rule. Its first Prime Minister was an Indo-Mauritian, Seewoosagur Ramgoolam. Mauritius since became a Republic in 1992, and it is governed by another Indo-Mauritian leader, Aneerood Jugnauth, who assumed power in 1982. (See Larry Bowman's *Mauritius: Democracy and Development in the Indian Ocean* for an overview of Mauritian history).

<sup>2</sup> According to a 1989 census, Mauritius's population stands at 1,080,000 inhabitants. Prior to the influx of South Asian labour from 1835 onwards, African slaves constituted the majority of the island's population. By 1861 the South Asian population assumed the majority, constituting two thirds of the general population. Mauritians today are made up of Franco-Mauritians (i.e., French descent), Creoles (i.e., mixed European and African or South Asian ancestry); Indo-Mauritians (i.e., South Asian ancestry) and Sino-Mauritians (i.e., Chinese ancestry). (See Bowman.)

<sup>3</sup> South Asian immigration to Mauritius stemmed mainly from the northern region of Bihar, while there was also a spat of immigration from the southern region of Madras. The majority of immigrants were lower caste Hindus, though there were also a number of Muslims, Christians and upper-caste Hindus. (See Tinker's *A New System of Slavery*, Bowman's *Mauritius: Democracy and Development* and Marina Carter's *Servants, Settlers and Sirdars: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1871*.)

<sup>4</sup> All parenthetical references to *That Others Might Live* will be abbreviated as TOML. I am using the only existing Orient Paperback edition of the novel, which is sadly out of print.

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<sup>5</sup> There is no record of indigenous peoples prior to the series of seafaring encounters which began with Arab and later Portuguese and Dutch navigators. Though the Dutch attempted settlement in 1638, the island's first major settlement was by the French who colonized the island from 1721 until the British take-over in 1810. But even the British did not settle the island in large numbers, the cultural implications of which will be discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> The novel is based on a shipwreck which occurred in 1744. Jacques Henri Bernardin de St Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* is core literary reading for Mauritian students. The writer/philosopher wrote the story during his brief stay on the island. The island's other historical visitor of note is Charles Darwin who was obviously enchanted by the island's unique flora and fauna, best symbolized by the extinct dodo bird.

<sup>7</sup> See Naipaul's first travelogue, *The Overcrowded Barracoon and other articles* (1972), a collection of political and social commentary on South America, the Caribbean, India and Africa.

<sup>8</sup> I am ironically borrowing the term from Antonio Benitez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and Post-Modern Perspective*, of which more will be said later in this chapter.

<sup>9</sup> I borrow the term from Deloughery's discussion of the Caribbean/Pacific Rim. Deloughery accredits Marlene Nourbese Philip for the term "*i-landness*" which foregrounds the subjectivity of the islander as a poetic reclamation of history and identity.

<sup>10</sup> Referring to the plantation colonies, Tinker asserts that Mauritius is "the most Indianized of all these territories" (Preface xiii).

<sup>11</sup> Slaves from the Subcontinent were brought to Mauritius by French planters as early as the eighteenth century. They constituted 13% of the population prior to British colonization. (See Tinker, 44; Northrup, 60; and Bowman, 15.)

<sup>12</sup> By the 1930s, Creole and Indo-Mauritian demands were more effectively conveyed in the emergence of what would become permanent political organizations, such as the Indian Cultural Association, the Hindu Cultural Revival Movement, the Mauritian Agricultural Labourers' Association and the Mauritian Labour Party. The other major



party, Parti Mauricien, represents primarily Franco-Mauritian/Creole interests. while further divisions arose in the formation of a Muslim organization, the Comité d'action Musulman, and another Hindu-dominated party, the Independent Forward Bloc. Despite the obvious ethnic delineations in Mauritian politics, Creole and Indo-Mauritian interests were more often than not in alignment. In fact, ethnic confrontations have been few and far between. (See Bowman and Lionnet.)

<sup>13</sup> Bhojpuri is itself a creolized Hindi spoken in the region known as Bihar, in present-day India. Since the majority of Indo-Mauritians are of Bihari origin, Bhojpuri predominates among South Asian vernaculars. As Danielle Quet suggests, Creole and Bhojpuri vie for acceptance as national idioms in Mauritius ("Mauritian Voices" 305). See also Lionnet's discussion of Mauritius's linguistic and cultural hybridity.

<sup>14</sup> See Angela Smith's survey, "Mauritian Literature in English" in *The Writing of East and Central Africa*, and Michel Fabre's "Mauritian Voices: A Panorama of Contemporary Creative Writing in English" in *World Literature Written in English*.

<sup>15</sup> There is very little scholarship on this body of writing. I have found only four surveys of Mauritian Literature in English (that of Quet, Fabre, Smith and Bhautoo-Dewnarain). Individual authors have enjoyed even less critical attention to date. My own study of Beeharry's *That Other Might Live* appears to be the first lengthy examination of his work. As brief as it is, Arthur Pollard's is the only published study of the novel to date.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Pollard erroneously claims that Beeharry is the only native writer in English to have set his novel in Mauritius. Anand Mulloo's *Watch Them Go Down* (1967) depicts the historical 1930s labour movement initiated by Indo-Mauritian cane labourers.

<sup>17</sup> Given Beeharry's political and literary commitment to documenting the material conditions of Mauritius's "downtrodden," his oeuvre lends itself to a Marxist reading. However, I have resisted such ideological pigeonholing, for I believe that Beeharry is simply a humanist responding to the most urgent avenues for reform in an agriculturally-based economy, and whose championing of human rights extends as much to the injustices of race, caste and gender as to class and labour.

<sup>18</sup> Danielle Quet conducted a follow-up survey to that of Michel Fabre. Both studies are restricted to literature produced between 1920-1980. The most current survey of Mauritian Writing in English is that of Nandini Bhautoo-Dewnarain.

<sup>19</sup> *Girmitiya* is one of many terms specific to indenture history, or what I have termed the “vocabulary of indenture.” It refers to the “agreement” signed by indentured peoples to honour their 2-5 year labour contracts. The Indentured labourers were often referred to as the *girmit-wallahs*, *girmitiyas* or “agreement people.” *Kala Pani* is translated as “black water,” so named for the “strict caste injunctions” which forbade travel “beyond the Indus to the west, and the Brahmaputra to the east” in the fear of caste contamination and other impurities (Tinker 46). *Jahaji Bhai* is literally translated as “ship brothers” (I will discuss this term in more detail later in this chapter.) These are all Hindi terms.

<sup>20</sup> In this study, the writers who most directly evoke indenture history are Guyana’s Rooplall Monar, Trinidad’s Lakshmi Persaud, South Africa’s Farida Karodia and Malaysia’s K.S. Maniam.

<sup>21</sup> See Barbadian novelist George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*.

<sup>22</sup> I borrow this term from Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s seminal article, “The Language of African Literature.” Ngugi loosely defines “colonial alienation” as the process of linguistic and, by extension, intellectual and cultural distancing that occurs in the gradual identification with the colonizer through the ideological and cultural precepts of a Eurocentric education system. This term will be further contextualized in later chapters.

<sup>23</sup> See specifically V.S. Naipual’s *The Mimic Men*; Lakshmi Persaud’s *Sastra*; and K.S. Maniam’s *The Return*.

<sup>24</sup> See Bowman for a discussion of the significance of the OAU Conference to Mauritius’s presence in the continental African and international arena.

<sup>25</sup> In fact, this novel in particular exposes Beeharry’s affinity to other African writers who belong to the South Asian diaspora. We will see this affinity in Chapter 2, which discusses Peter Nazareth’s portrayal of Uganda’s exiled citizens of South Asian origins.

<sup>26</sup> This term is attributed to Rudyard Kipling, in a 1906 address delivered at the Royal Academy, although it can be traced back to Mallarmé's sonnet, "Le tombeau d'Edgar Poe": "Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu." I borrow the term from Michael Bernstein's discussion of the modern long poem as an epic undertaking. (See his "Introduction" to *The Tale of the Tribe*.)

<sup>27</sup> See Arthur Pollard's cursory look at the novel: "Beeharry's *That Others Might Live*" (135-8).

<sup>28</sup> I am thinking primarily of the haunting metaphorization of the sea in Derek Walcott's epic poem, *Omeros*, although there are countless other examples in the works of Jamaica Kincaid, Edwidge Danticatt, George Lamming, Jacques Roumain, etc.

<sup>29</sup> See entry for "trans-" in the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed.

<sup>30</sup> This is borrowed from the title of Hugh Tinker's foundational study of indentured labour as "a new system of slavery." Subsequent scholarship (such as that of Marina Carter) attempts to nuance further the history of indentured peoples as a more variegated experience, though few argue with Tinker's view of the dehumanizing conditions of the plantation system.

<sup>31</sup> Having said this, Beeharry omits the Muslim South Asian migrant in his representative portrayal of Indo-Mauritian diversity. Beeharry includes a faint Muslim presence in a few scenes but never gives voice to the Muslim figure in a direct manner. In fact, this is a consistent trend in works by the descendants of indentured labourers. In this sense, Farida Karodia is an exception insofar as she portrays the Indo-Muslim diasporic community in South Africa (see Chapter 2).

<sup>32</sup> Manish's narrative seems inspired by Beeharry's short story entitled "Le Nouveau Venu" found in a multilingual collection of his short fiction, *The Road Ahead*.

<sup>33</sup> See Tinker and Carter for an in-depth study of the genesis and reform of the contractual system of indenture. As both historians state, the number of years of bondage were themselves under constant revision, fluctuating anywhere from two to five year periods. All historians concur, however, that the 1870s ushered in major

reform. The system of indenture officially lasted till 1917. By 1922, labourers were finally free to work wherever they wished.

<sup>34</sup> In 1871, Adolphe de Plevitz forwarded such a petition, signed by approximately 10,000 labourers, to the Governor of Mauritius, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon (1871-4). For a more detailed study of de Plevitz's role in labour reform, see S.B. Mookherji's *The Indenture System in Mauritius (1837-1915)*.

<sup>35</sup> A "baitka" is a Hindu socio-religious association. Throughout the novel, various community activities are shown to revolve around the "baitkas."

<sup>36</sup> By 1844, women comprised 17% of the Indo-Mauritian population. This ratio increased once labourers were permitted to emigrate with their families, but it was a gradual change which left women vulnerable to abuse by planter and labourer alike. (See Tinker and Carter.)

<sup>37</sup> I am referring of course to Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Beeharry is obviously influenced by Hardy's brand of realism (though without the latter's overly deterministic view), given his tribute to the latter in the form of an epigraph preceding *The Heart and Soul*.

<sup>38</sup> *Malagash* is the term used to describe the descendants of African slaves from Madagascar.

<sup>39</sup> I will further nuance Said's concept in later chapters. See Said's "The Mind of Winter" in *Harper's*.

<sup>40</sup> Gyatri Gopinath offers the first major literary study of its kind to theorize the relationship between "transgressive" sexuality, heteronormative discourse and diasporic experience.

## **Chapter 3 - Uganda & South Africa**

**Writing Between and Beyond the Master Narrative(s):  
The Search for an Alternate Politics of Inclusion in  
Peter Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle* and Farida Karodia's *Daughters of the Twilight***

In Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*, one of the most canonized African texts, the omniscient narrator comments:

The Indian traders were said to be very rich. They too employed some black boys whom they treated as nothing. You could never like the Indians because their customs were strange and funny in a bad way. [. . .] The Indians feared Europeans and if you went to buy in a shop and a white man found you, the Indian would stop selling to you and, trembling all over, would begin to serve him. [. . .]; You did not know what to call the Indian. Was he also a white man? Did he too come from England? (7-8)

In the above lines, Ngũgĩ captures a common stereotype of “Indians” in Africa: i.e., a colonized people both in Africa and in their original homeland and yet “‘colonizing’ immigrants” serving both European and personal economic interests by “acting as middlemen between the white colonizers and black Africans” (Ocaya-Lakidi 82). This is an image of duplicity which has plagued South Asian diasporic peoples since their settlement on the African continent in the mid-nineteenth century.

The South Asian presence in Africa predates the colonial era, a period during which their activities under the auspices of the Arab Sultanate of Zanzibar contributed to their earlier reputation as settlers and traders.<sup>1</sup> Social historians such as Dent Ocaya-Lakidi agree,<sup>2</sup> however, that once South Asian peoples arrived in the thousands as British colonial subjects, anti-South Asian feeling was sedimented in images of Punjabis policing the East Africa Protectorate on behalf of the British Empire; of Gujarati merchants amassing commercial strongholds and material wealth;

of the particularly alien practices and customs of Hindu migrants; of the ubiquitous indentured labourers' seeming usurpation of "the indigenous workers' rightful, negotiated place in the socio-economic hierarchy" (Carter and Torabully 118); and of nationalistic zeal directed outward to the Indian Subcontinent rather than syncopated with the African call to independence.<sup>3</sup>

Ngũgĩ must have recognized the need to challenge these stereotypes when he suggested to his friend, Peter Nazareth, to write a novel about the Goan-East African community.<sup>4</sup> In fact, South Asian diasporic novelists in the African continent have hardly needed Ngũgĩ's prodding to debunk these prevailing stereotypes not only in the interest of painting a more favourable portrait of South Asian identity but also of projecting a more heterogeneous and inclusive portrait of a post-colonial or post-apartheid Africa.

In their own precarious positions between a racially divisive European ideology and an emergent Pan-African consciousness, each of which tends to label the "Asian/Indian"<sup>5</sup> in essentialist terms, the first generation of diasporic writers such as Peter Nazareth and Farida Karodia offer an insider perspective which particularizes South Asian identity and experience. In calling attention to questions of ethnic and cultural diversity, however, they also invariably foreground the fact of their "difference" in relation to their indigenous African counterparts. Consequently, the diasporic text paradoxically serves as a testament to the diasporic subject's identification with greater African society, while highlighting the disjunctive nature of the community as a multiply positioned and, by extension, variously allied body.

When set against the backdrop of a changing political landscape to which the diasporic subject cannot make indigenous claims but nevertheless identifies as the “homeland,” particularly as a second- or subsequent- generation citizen, the “Asian/Indian” character manifests a self-conscious awareness of the relative nature of belonging, on the one hand, and asserts a distinctive identity against an exclusivist or an assimilationist discourse, on the other.

This is hardly reminiscent of Deepchand Beeharry’s epic undertaking in *That Others Might Live*, a sociohistorical novel which charts the indentured labourers’ odyssey as pioneering settlers, spiritually allied in the common struggle for material and cultural survival. In fact, the differences between the Mauritian and continental African settings are numerous. Even when factoring in the older presence of South Asian peoples along East African ports, it is safe to say that the diaspora of the mainland has never come close to forming the majority populace it has in the island of Mauritius. Michael Twaddle states that “within East Africa itself, residual communities of South Asian descent live on in Kenya and Tanzania, about a quarter of the size they were in the early 1960s (which represents roughly one half of 1% of the current estimated total populations of these two countries), with of course fewer staying on in Uganda” (“East African Asians” 150).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, even though the number of South Asians in South Africa exceeds that of Mauritius, they still constitute a minority within what was up until recently an Apartheid state. To date, therefore, the novels of East and South Africa have looked less toward their own historic beginnings as to the more immediately felt effects of decolonization and



Apartheid—sociopolitical upheavals which have radically disrupted the lives of South Asian diasporic peoples themselves.

There are several other striking differences between continental Africa and the island plantation colony of Mauritius: for example, South Asian peoples have manifested a greater variety of occupations and backgrounds in the former context where immigration consisted of a high proportion of “free passengers” as well as “indentured labourers.” They have also tended to maintain closer ties to the motherland, given the greater affluence of many of these settlers. More than their counterparts in island colonies such as Mauritius, the diasporic communities of East and South Africa came to reflect the full spectrum of South Asian migration during the colonial era. In fact, their livelihoods were earned as agricultural labourers on sugar plantations and manual labourers on the East Africa Railway; as petty traders and merchants; as professionals schooled in medicine, law, accountancy and teaching; and, last but not least, as clerics and lower-end administrators for the ever-expansive colonial bureaucracy. Twaddle states that the settlers occupied

so many differing positions in the infant colonial administration as artisans, police and railway personnel, as well as working as traders [...] that Herbert Samuel remarked in 1902 that the ‘progress of [that is, British colonial takeover of] these portions of Africa would have been slow indeed had it not been possible to draw upon our Asiatic possessions for unlimited supplies of subordinate labour with hand and brain’. (156-7)

This is a far cry from the caricatural “Indian shopkeeper” shunned by the likes of Ngũgĩ’s Gikuyu<sup>7</sup> characters or from the stereotypical view of the obsequious servant or docile labourer edified in the European writer’s imagination.<sup>8</sup> In other

words, the diasporas of the East and South African context, though necessarily different in demographic and historical terms, share an important feature: the varied occupations, backgrounds and destinies of South Asian immigrants and their descendants have combined to produce a diaspora that is as socio-economically and ethno-culturally stratified as it is diverse, as embroidered into as it is constantly altered by (albeit less perceptibly) the unfolding fabric of African and South Asian history. Diasporic peoples in these African regions have historically demonstrated the high degree of resourcefulness and adaptability invariably required to contend with a continually changing socioeconomic climate.

However, in their racial delineation as “Asians” (or, in the case of South Africa, “Indians”), diasporic peoples have rarely factored into the articulation of an African sociopolitical identity and, by extension, its national literatures. Even though South Asian peoples continue to make their home in Africa, their own literatures often describe communities wedged between contending powers, internally split by a host of inter and intra-communal differences and dislocated, either by voluntary or forced exile, from their African homelands. To this end, Nazareth is quick to denounce any essentialist view of South Asian diasporic peoples as a racial construction, itself a legacy of colonialism, which has little basis in reality: “Many East African leaders, taking the colonial cue, have often used the term ‘the Asian community.’ Yet there never was an ‘Asian community’ in East Africa. There were several different ‘tribes,’ all mutually exclusive: Patels, Ismailis, Sikhs, Bohras, Goans, etc.” (“The Asian Presence” 17).

Today, therefore, writing by and about this diaspora is usually produced and published in the Western hemisphere. This is nonetheless an ongoing and vital stream of various genres by authors such as M.G. Vassanji, Adam Zameenzad and Yasmin Ladha. Contrary to Robert Gregory's definitive conclusion in his 1981 survey, "Literary Development in East Africa: The Asian Contribution," South Asian diasporic writing in or about Africa is by no means limited to a body of work that began and ended in the "period of transition, the decade before independence and the decade after" (440). Rather, the dispersal of African writers across the globe speaks of the nature of diasporic experience as one in which movement and migration is a continual process that is contingent upon the workings of historical forces.

Of course, Gregory could not have predicted the fact that East African countries would eventually re-open their doors to their former residents. For instance, in 1991, President Yoweri Museveni officially invited the exiled "Asians" to return to Uganda, a few years after the overthrow of Idi Amin.<sup>9</sup> Though the return journey has been infrequent, the jury is still out regarding the longevity of literary production by this community in the East African context. Similarly, in the South African context, since authors such as Farida Karodia have chosen to return to a post-apartheid state, one might optimistically speculate that South African literature can look forward to a pluricultural renaissance.

Suffice it to say that this "period of transition" merely shifted the axis of literary production by South Asians in their exodus from their African homelands.<sup>10</sup> To this end, Nazareth more accurately contends that Ugandan Literature first needs to

be “tracked down” (“Waiting for Amin” 8) before it can be considered part of the canon of African Literature. I would argue that this is also true of the greater body of African Literature by writers of South Asian origins (with the exception perhaps of Mauritius) because those who speak of their experiences of the “African homeland” are quite often doing so from a position of exile and migrancy. Novelist and critic Peter Nazareth is himself a second-generation Ugandan who now writes from his location in the United States, although his novels are set in Uganda where they flip between not only an East African and South Asian but also a specifically Goan perspective. Indeed, Nazareth might be called the quintessential diasporic subject, given a multiply positioned identity which includes the Goan/South Asian diaspora of Malaysia (his mother’s birthplace). Similarly, author Farida Karodia is a second-generation South African, for whom the process of migration signals her own personal journey from South Africa to Canada and her Gujarati father’s journey from the Indian Subcontinent to South Africa, a generation earlier.

Nazareth’s *In a Brown Mantle* (1972) and Farida Karodia’s *Daughters of the Twilight* (1986) are first novels whose characters, thematics and settings are a testament to the diversity and multiply positioned identity of the South Asian diasporic community. These authors particularize diasporic experience in their respective portrayals of the highly distinctive Goan community (primarily employed as British Civil Servants in East Africa) and the majority Gujarati community of traders and merchants in East and South Africa.<sup>11</sup> Both Nazareth and Karodia focus on the “Passenger Indians,” migrants who voluntarily emigrated to Africa at the turn

of the twentieth century, adding to the already substantial community of formerly indentured labourers therein.<sup>12</sup> While Nazareth provides a vivid and detailed portrait of the Goan-East African community and its relative segregation not only from the African majority but also from other “Indian” peoples in East Africa, Karodia brings to view the various individual and social alliances formed between non-white peoples in the oppressive wake of Apartheid. This is not to say that the intercommunal divisions prevalent in Uganda did not exist in South Africa. On the contrary, as Hilda Kuper states in her study *Indian People in Natal*, because of the enormous diversity of South Asians in South Africa, “internal dissension was destroying the political effectiveness of the Indians as a group” (47). However, each novel ironizes the subsumation of inter- and intra-communal stratification alike by the more oppressive Manichean dichotomies of a racially hierarchized state.

Both authors thus pioneer relatively uncharted literary terrain in their depiction of South Asian diasporic peoples in Africa, be it under the colonial administration, the apartheid regime or the emergence of the post-colonial nation. Nazareth’s *In a Brown Mantle* is a fictional account of Uganda’s rise to independence, and its subsequent drive to wrestle commercial strongholds from the “Asians” or “Mr. Browns” (IBM 26)<sup>13</sup> of East Africa. Farida Karodia’s *Daughters of the Twilight* recalls the similar fate awaiting South Asian migrants in South Africa in her depiction of their “wholesale removal” (Kuper xv) from their properties, businesses and homes under the *Group Areas Act* of 1950, one of apartheid’s principal laws.

In their commonly articulated positions between different and, more often than not, adversarial social, cultural and political systems, Nazareth and Karodia serve as a unique voice in African Literature in neither fully belonging to the small minority of writers of European origins who speak from the historical center of institutionalized power nor to the vast majority of indigenous African writers who speak from the cultural and political center of the post-colonial state. As such, Nazareth and Karodia's texts probe the tensions and slippages between competing ideologies while simultaneously resisting the perpetuation of hegemonic narratives that reinstitutionalize a racialized and binary view of selfhood and nation. For instance, Nazareth echoes Ocaya-Lakidi's assertion that racial prejudices in East Africa were first entrenched in black consciousness as the instrument of imperialism to put its "exploitative policies into effect" ("Black Attitudes" 82), only to be further deployed in the neo-imperial interests of a post-independence elite.

In light of the fact that many African writers reside in the Western hemisphere, Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle* is unique in that it was written and published<sup>14</sup> in the author's native Uganda, a few days before President Idi Amin Dada ordered the expulsion of the country's "Asian" populace.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the novel itself eerily prophecies both Amin's overthrow of Uganda's first President Milton Obote and what would be Nazareth's own exile as a result of the expulsion edict of November 5, 1972.<sup>16</sup> Nazareth's first novel addresses this community not from a retrospective or literal distance but from the author's insider perspective as one of many citizens in a plural Ugandan society.<sup>17</sup> Though written from his vantage point in

the United States, Nazareth's subsequent novel, *The General is Up* (1991), also deals exclusively with the African context. Echoing the trope of the "mad king" prefigured in Caribbean and Latin American Literature, this novel is a scathing satirization of Idi Amin.<sup>18</sup>

Critic Abasi Kiyimba state that the only two African novels to have "most directly" depicted Amin's notorious leadership are Nazareth's *The General is Up* and Alumidi Osinya's *The Amazing Saga of Field Marshal Abdullah Salim Fisi (Or How the Hyena Got His)* (129). More importantly, perhaps, *The General is Up* is the first work of fiction to document and dramatize the frenzied circumstances under which the South Asian population had to leave Uganda. Indeed, Nazareth can be said to have answered Ngũgĩ's call for a novel about Goans as well as successfully actualized his own desire to write "a novel about Goans which was simultaneously a political novel about Africa" (Nazareth, "Interview" 90).

Unlike Nazareth, Karodia did not write her first novel while living in her country of birth, but rather partakes of the company of those of her literary peers who felt compelled to leave South Africa in order to write about it honestly and critically. As Bernth Lindfors attests, even before apartheid was institutionalized, many writers felt unable to write freely in a repressive atmosphere. Apartheid's strict censorship laws and "victimization" of the regime's opponents eventually stifled any literary activity deemed remotely "protestatory." Karodia is thus a part of "a floating exile community" of South African writers who "continued to write about South African matters even after decades of living elsewhere" (Lindfors, "Sites of Production" 167).

Like many of her literary peers, Karodia has since made the journey back to a “New South Africa.”<sup>19</sup> In a rare profile of her literary career, Anver Versi states that Karodia’s exile came about in the wake of her discovery that she had been blacklisted as “an enemy of the state” (40). Facing a forced internment in her own country after a short period of residence in Zambia, Karodia opted instead to seek refuge in Canada where she would pen two novels, *Daughters of the Twilight* (1986) and *A Shattering of Silence* (1993), and a short story collection, *Against an African Sky and Other Stories* (1997).

*Daughters of the Twilight* is not the first novel by a South African of Karodia’s background, but it is one of the only novels to date about the diaspora in South Africa. Bernth Lindfors states that “South Africa’s first Indian novel” is Ansuyah R. Singh’s *Behold the Earth Mourns*, published circa 1960 and long out of circulation. Lindfors describes the novel as “a forgotten piece of South African fiction [. . .] unnoticed by literary commentators for more than thirty years” (“Love in Oppressive Times” 66). Lindfors’s assessment of Singh’s novel subscribes to a reductive view of the “Indian” diaspora as a seemingly homogenous entity that is “characteristically Indian in its philosophy” (67). To this end, Lindfors interprets the earlier novel’s use of Hindu principles as representative of all “Indian responses to blatant oppression,” while simultaneously romanticizing the “deep spirituality with which Indians [. . .] approach matters of the heart” (72).

Lindfors’s reading of this earlier novel’s distinctly Hindu ethos, complete with its didactic reliance on Gandhi’s influential battle cry of *satyagraha* (i.e., passive



resistance), against racial inequality, is not at issue here. What is at issue is Lindfors's conflation of the "Hindu-Indian" perspective as the definitive experience of the South Asian diaspora in South Africa. In fact, Karodia's novel implicitly writes against the traditional "Indian" narrative which, in its homage to Gandhi's role in South Africa, often plays itself out "as a battle between the brown man and the white man, the black man not being deemed worthy of involvement by either of the protagonists" (Huttenback 44). Indeed, as Marina Carter suggests, Gandhi's legal interventions on behalf of the "South African Indian" were themselves mired in the rhetoric of caste/class hierarchies: "Gandhi himself, in his early years in South Africa, persistently agitated on behalf of the Indian merchants, to distance them from the [lower caste] coolies" (*Coolitude* 118).

As a semi-autobiographical reflection of Karodia's own hybrid South African identity as the daughter of a Gujarati-Muslim father and a "coloured" mother who "'were the only Indians in the town'" (Karodia, quoted in Versi 39), *Daughters of the Twilight* provides an alternate vision to this "characteristically Indian" portrait. Set entirely in the author's place of birth--a rural township in the Eastern Cape that is far from the hubbub of an increasingly urbanized diasporic populace--Karodia's novel also breaks the stereotype of the exclusive inner sanctum of the South Asian diaspora while simultaneously foregrounding its unshakeable sense of "community." Focusing on the Mohammed family as an allegorical composite of South African identity, this sense of community is anchored to ancestral customs and ties, on the one hand, and reflective of South African diversity, on the other.

Moreover, in her emphasis on the non-white populations' shared experiences of racial discrimination, Karodia's novel widens the critical lens not only to factor South Asian peoples among the casualties of Apartheid but also to depict a politically mobilized consciousness which crosses the racial divide in its identification with all of Apartheid's victims. Communal solidarity is illustrated in the family patriarch's (Abdul) insistence that his eldest daughter marry a Muslim South Asian, as well as in the family's frequent cultural excursions to the "Asiatic bazaar" (*DT* 81). In turn, Abdul's adherence to tradition is juxtaposed with his affinity for a motley group of individuals: i.e., his "coloured" wife, Mevrou; Dora Oliphant, the family's sympathetic Afrikaaner neighbour; and Daniel, the family's "native" squatter. The family is thus an agglomeration of races who, to albeit varying degrees, share a history of economic exploitation.

*Daughters of the Twilight* assumes the form of a *bildungsroman* which traces the social and psychological development of the protagonist, Meena, alongside the official gestation of the Apartheid State. As such, it charts the impact (on the lives of ordinary people) of the dehumanizing apartheid law, the *Group Areas Act*, a policy which forcibly seized the properties, businesses and homes of non-white peoples, subsequently designating the least inhabitable stretches of land for occupation by the people it categorically dispossessed. As historian Roger Ormond states, in his overview of apartheid policies, the highest percentage to have felt the consequences of the *Group Areas Act* of 1950 were of "Indian" origin.<sup>20</sup> According to Ormond, therefore, the "Coloured" and "Indian" communities "have long and consistently

called for the abolition of the Act" (*The Apartheid Handbook* 33), a fact that is alluded to in the increasing politicization of Meena's consciousness.

Both novels under study thus give voice to an otherwise untold history that is nonetheless an integral part of the grand narrative of imperialism. Conversely, in either the Uganda of *In a Brown Mantle* or the South Africa of *Daughters of the Twilight*, each country's destiny is delicately and tentatively imagined in a character who realistically confronts his/her state of "inbetweenness"; that is, the "twilight" state which condemns the sons and daughters of the diaspora to an uncertain personal and collective destiny. This interstitial condition acts as a central metaphor for a state of "belonging" that is perpetually put into question, sometimes violently so. For instance, the Mohammed family's sense of continual displacement in *Daughters of the Twilight* is grounded in a history of marginalization that precedes the ravages of the *Group Areas Act*. As Meena, the protagonist, says of her father:

He had come from India in search of adventure. At the age of fifteen he arrived in Durban with other Indian immigrants who had come to South Africa as indentured labourers to work the sugar plantations in Natal. He had arrived in the period following the turmoil created by Mahatma Gandhi's call for civil disobedience, a time when the provinces of Natal and Transvaal had passed laws restricting the movement of Indians from one area to another. [. . .] But Papa, like thousands of other Indians, had managed to slip through the borders and had escaped to Dordrecht [. . . and then] settled in Sterkstroom. (DT 24)<sup>21</sup>

As the above quotation demonstrates, *Daughters of the Twilight* brings to evidence the human consequences of the policies and laws now documented in the footnotes of history. As such, even in this brief biography of Abdul's historical genealogy, the narrator traces the difficult plight of indentured labourers (even as

“freed” subjects). Abdul’s physical and occupational shifts therefore recall an era when plantation workers had to redirect their energies from “agriculture to industry services, from plantation farms and rural settlements to urban centres” (North-Coombes 60), after the industrialization of the Natal province where they were primarily concentrated.

The precarious position embodied in the “twilight” or “inbetween” state is thus not to be misconstrued as a site of privileged mobility such as the kind afforded the transnational subject whose distance from the homeland is a question of choice. Nor is it the self-acknowledged state of the immigrant whose physical displacement has been recent enough to be an accepted part of his or her condition. In Rushdie’s transnational worldview, an immigrant or exile’s displacement from the homeland results in a split or “double perspective” (“Imaginary Homelands” 19)—i.e., a dichotomized insider/outsider condition—which forces the individual to acknowledge the shifting and relative nature of identity, thereby destabilizing a static or essentialist view of selfhood or nationhood. The diasporic writer’s simultaneously “plural and partial” (15) imagination mirrors Rushdie’s “double perspective” as a narrative device which brings to view a decentred or multiply positioned consciousness.

However, Karodia and Nazareth insist that for the second generation South Asian in Africa, “inbetweenness” is usually an imposed condition of marginalization within the homeland itself—as Rushdie himself poetically states, “that form of internal exile which in South Africa is called the ‘homeland’” (19). In the albeit extreme cases of Uganda and South Africa, therefore, this interstitial state is brought

about by exclusivist doctrines and often extreme political measures. What the “twilight” atmospheres of Nazareth and Karodia’s texts underline, then, is the diasporic community’s sense of volatility in Africa as a *twice-displaced* people: i.e., both in their historical displacement from the Indian Subcontinent as well as in subsequent forms of dislocation, be they literal or metaphorical, as a minority whose future standing in the new homeland is a continual negotiation between competing and often complicit discourses of power.

In this light, Arlene A. Elder justly concludes that to the writer of South Asian origins in Africa, “The African world [. . .] is one in which race and culture, rather than place of birth, are crucial” (“Indian Writing” 138).<sup>22</sup> From albeit contrasting perspectives, therefore, Nazareth and Karodia emphasize the imperative of racial and cultural collaboration in the insurance of equality within a pluricultural/multiracial state. As I have suggested, however, a self-conscious awareness of cultural and racial “differences” results in an uncomfortable double-bind which at once upholds the distinctive identity of the diasporic subject and leaves him/her open to often brutally enforced racist policies. In this sense, Nazareth and Karodia’s texts only faintly conform to R. Radhakrishnan’s theorization of the “diasporic location” as “the space of the hyphen that tries to coordinate, within an evolving relationship, the identity politics of one’s place of origin with that of one’s present home” (*Diasporic Mediations* xiii). For the second- and subsequent generation South Asian in East or South Africa, inter-cultural and -racial collaboration is not so much attained in the metaphorical coordination between home and origin (here and elsewhere), as in the

self-conscious affiliation between self and other; that is, between the individual and the greater local community.

In these diasporic texts, “home” functions as a metaphor of familial and social unity rather than as a symbol of physical/material stability. When the Mohammed family is evicted from their property and business, for instance, displacement is a multi-generational legacy: that is, both grandmother and father are reminded of their previous experiences of dispossession under a colonial system: “‘When will it end, Delia? When? All my life I’ve been kicked around.’” (*DT* 93). Thus, for the second generation diasporic subject such as Meena, home comes to signify her sense of connectedness to others over and above a romantic attachment to place:

We were leaving behind us not only our home but also a big chunk of our lives. Tears slid down Ma’s cheeks as she watched Gladys’s forlorn figure in the rear-view mirror.

I turned around for a last look. Both she and Daniel has been such an integral part of our lives, the many threads woven into the fabric of our existence. (92)

In their first-person perspectives, these novels write against the reification of master narratives by particularizing and relativizing history and identity. However, in neither novel does the first-person perspective collapse under the playful semantics of subjective indeterminacies or metafictional ploys. For one, diasporic writers are keenly aware that they are filling a historical narrative gap. Theirs is a two-fold task not only to subvert dominant discourses but, as Arun Mukherjee more accurately suggests, to highlight the historical realities that have been buried or forgotten by the grand narratives of history.<sup>23</sup> These writers therefore deconstruct history while they are simultaneously engaged in the discourse of self-representation. In this case,

Radhakrishnan offers a helpful view of the interplay between diasporic experience and post-coloniality as having given rise to a “politics of ethnicity [which] has to be necessarily double-based: on the one hand, a deconstructive and transformative engagement with dominant discourses, and on the other, the affirmative and proactive creating of its own history” (*Diasporic Mediations* xxii-xxiii). When filtered through the workings of a formal narrative strategy, the emphasis on subjective experience in each of these novels is played out as a tension between individualism and self-determination, or “hegemonic acts of self-representation” versus an “agential politics of identity” (xxiii) that is simultaneously self-interrogative.

In Karodia’s novel, this tension is manifested in what Miki Flockemann calls the narrative’s “dual focus,” a narrative strategy which makes possible the dialectic between contestatory or contrasting perspectives. Here, the protagonist’s development is played out as a critical dialogue with that of her older sister, Yasmin (a role model and foil). In her comparative analysis of the use of the *bildungsroman* in black women’s writing, Flockemann suggests that the “dual focus” subverts the traditional construction of the genre as an individual’s linear progression toward dominant national ideals. For the subaltern female, such a progression merely culminates in the stark options available for women of colour in a colonial or post-colonial context. In contrast, the dialogic interplay between two closely related characters engenders a critical negotiation between self/other to ensure that “selfhood is not defined by the ruling hegemonies, but in opposition to them through an

identification with the local community, [such that] the construction of an alternative selfhood seems possible" ("Not-Quite Insiders" 38-9).

In her claim "to be just what I am" (*DT* 73), therefore, Meena begins to resist both the colonial and patriarchal discourse within which the subaltern female is doubly circumscribed. Thus, the father's pragmatic understanding of his daughters' education as an insurance of their financial well-being or marriage-ability—"Perhaps an education will help to make the package more attractive" (38)—betrays a myopic view, one which mirrors an assimilative state education that delimits the social and professional "possibilities available for non-white girls" (41). By observing the restricted social mobility afforded her sister by means of a private education for "coloured girls," Meena realizes that self-empowerment necessitates an "agential politics of identity" over her sister's brand of yearning for acceptance by the Afrikaaner elite. Moreover, it narrativizes what Hilda Kuper delineates as the "South African Indian's" often dichotomized position between an active identification with African liberation struggles and a "conciliatory" approach to the dominant system in the insurance of greater social mobility.

For South Africa's "daughters" such as Meena and Yasmin, racial injustice is initiated in a colonial curriculum embedded in European ideals which are not only dissonant with the "South African Indian's" daily lives but also an assault on their own history as the descendants of indentured labourers: "There, to my horror, beneath the oval stamp on the inside cover were the carefully printed words of a jingle: 'Coolie, coolie, ring the bell; coolie, coolie, go to hell'" (*DT* 20). Indeed, as will be



seen in subsequent chapters, the “coolie” stereotype is a recurring motif that diasporic South Asian writers repeatedly challenge in their humanization of indentured existence as well as in their emphasis on the diversity and complexity of the migrant’s ethno-cultural identity. The younger generation of diasporic writers are particularly critical of the deployment of such stereotypes within an education system which “standardizes” the “nineteenth century official stereotype which had posited the dualistic coolie character – yielding and bowed before the plantation manager” (Carter and Torabully 62) and offensive to European sensibility as a subaltern of the lowest pedigree. It is interesting to note, then, that in Abdul’s double association with both the labourers and merchant class, the two seemingly contradictory stereotypes of the South Asian settler as a duplicitous economic pariah, on the one hand, and a docile “downtrodden labourer” (118), on the other, strategically cancel each other out.

Yasmin’s gradual “westernization” makes evident Frantz Fanon and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o’s assessments of the colonial education system as both assimilative and deracinating insofar as it trains the “colonized” to mimic the dominant culture while denying him/her entry into the racial hierarchy.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, Yasmin is shown to have internalized an Orientalist tradition which arrests her development behind the objectifying gaze of the colonizer. In this regard, she brings to view Spivak’s paradigm of the subaltern female who, caught between the imperatives of patriarchy and imperialism, inevitably carries over the traces of the essentialist discourses she attempts to resist<sup>25</sup>: i.e., in seeing herself as a sexual object, Yasmin ironically rebels

against the status quo in her transgressive sexual liaisons with a white South African male. Yasmin's rape by the neighbourhood bully is thus an ironic critique of her naive hope that racist doctrines will be subverted by individual acts of interracial union; a romantic idealism that seems unattainable without a concomitant dismantling of the ideological infrastructures that ensure her subjugation as a woman of colour.

Neither Nazareth nor Karodia evoke the paradigm of hybridity as a utopic solution to racist ideology. In fact, Nazareth rejects his diasporic counterpart Behadur Tejani's<sup>26</sup> contention that racial harmony can be actualized in the hybridization of the best of Indian and African cultures; that is, through interracial marriage. In the case of the apartheid regime where "coloured" peoples are denied equality on the very basis of their miscegenation,<sup>27</sup> a utopic view of interracial mixing is rendered particularly inoperative. Homi Bhabha's model of hybridity<sup>28</sup> as a decentring "constitutive ambivalence at the heart of colonial discursive production" (Young 161), insofar as it subverts the essentialist binary of self/other, seems inapplicable in a system that consciously marks the hybrid individual as a site of shame.<sup>29</sup>

In Karodia's novel, hybridity as a site of shame is explicitly embodied in Yasmin's rape and subsequent rejection of her "half-breed" child. Yasmin's rejection of her child implicitly extends to her own sense of deracination as a racially impure product of inter-racial marriage. Similarly, hybridity as an officially encoded strategy of cultural and political marginalization is brought to bear on Meena's developing awareness as a racially marked entity. Having to choose between her status as "coloured" or "Indian," Meena must ironically affirm her "hybridity" at the expense

of her “Indianness” so as to facilitate her entry into an urban school for “coloureds.” In other words, Meena’s “reclassification” is hardly a self-empowering celebration of her hybrid identity; rather, it is a capitulation to a government-enforced policy in which both “coloured” and “Indian” function as fixed and mutually exclusive racial categories. The Mohammed family’s hybrid identity can therefore only become a subversive site of resistance as a critical assertion of selfhood over the system that contains it.

Although Nazareth’s novel is critical of patriarchal structures, women function primarily as symbols for the prostitution of African culture rather than as active agents of change. Subsequently, the gradual disintegration of nationalist ideals within a post-independence society is typified in the protagonist’s objectification of women in his frequent “wenching” (*IBM* 101). In contrast, Karodia’s text deconstructs a male-centred narrative in which women are shown to be sidelined in the struggle for independence. In both of Karodia’s novels for instance, female characters are motioning towards or at the heart of liberation struggles which include a coterminous engagement with feminist politics. In Karodia’s *A Shattering of Silence*, a political novel depicting Mozambique’s violent uprising against Portuguese rule, a woman of Goan origins is a key player in the underground resistance. Similarly, in *Daughters of the Twilight*, Meena evolves into a highly politicized being in her distinctly Fanonist discovery that self-actualization often necessitates a militant assertion of identity against an inherently unequal system of representation.

Meena's first-hand experience of the apartheid bureaucracy in "Pretoria, the administrative capital" (*DT* 77), is thus a jarring awakening to "race" as a political construction. Meena's awakening is poetically symbolized in the juxtaposition between the bureaucratic confines of a monochromatic racial binary and the uncontainable variety of the natural world:

The heaviness which had threatened to stifle me was lifting. Images collided. [. . .] the purple masses of jacaranda blossoms, the patterns of light and shadow on the street as the sun broke through the intertwining branches, the blue of the sky reflected in the windows. What a fool I had been to let myself be upset by that Afrikaaner. My eyes and mind were once again in harmony. (78)

In her renewed sense of self-possession as a multiply positioned, heterogeneous identity, Meena's political consciousness is subsequently aroused in her discovery of the South African left as a multi-racial body: "Again, to my surprise, despite the strict segregation of races, I found whites and blacks surreptitiously squeezed into the small room. [. . .] We were soon joined by four other people, three of them Indian [. . .]" (83-4).

Although both texts are explicit in their identification with a national or Pan-African consciousness that denounces white supremacy, they function as "counter-narratives" which continually "disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (Bhabha, "DissemiNation" 300). For instance, Karodia not only indicts the institutionalization of Apartheid, but also the precedent set by the racially discriminatory policies of the British colonial administration. In the same breath, Karodia subtly balances her judgement of racist colonial practices in her characters' intermittent reflections on the hegemonic

narratives of Indian history: "India! India! You're always comparing this country to India. The British had their faults, I'd be the last one to deny that, but [. . .] Who can forget the atrocities committed by Indian upon Indian?" (*DT* 35-6). Similarly, the sectarian and other rivalries within the South Asian community described in Nazareth's novels undermine the diasporic subject's tendency to imagine the "Asian" community in idealistic or nostalgic terms.

In his study of Nazareth's novels, Tirop P. Simatei critiques Nazareth for over-emphasizing the devastating impact that colonial experience has exerted on post-colonial politics without a concomitant assessment of his "Asian" characters' implication in "their own hegemonic behaviour and ambitions" (*The Novel and the Politics of Nation Building* 113). Though Simatei accurately locates Nazareth's socialist perspective within a Fanonist tradition, he nevertheless misses the ironic undertones embedded in the author's repeated satirization of the diasporic community's ideological dissonances, political schisms and exclusive "club mentality." As Nazareth himself comments, "Goan history could be part of his [narrator's] consciousness and part of his excuse" ("Interview" 92).

Indeed, *In a Brown Mantle* looks to "The Abala Goan Institute" as the central symbol for the frictional interplay between the diaspora's competing loyalties and sense of community, differences which primarily begin in the Goans' segregation from the "Indian" community. In her study of the Goan community in the Ugandan capital, Jane Kuper can be seen to confirm Nazareth's view of the proliferating divisions within the South Asian Diasporic community: "For the Goans, the 'others'

were 'Indians', while the 'Indians' in turn joked about the Goans as 'Brown Europeans'" ("Goans in Kampala" 58).

Aside from their own historical divisions, the community is further split by the question of the community's allegiance to the British Empire versus its involvement in the fight for African independence. Indeed, the inter-related question of belonging and loyalty becomes the Goan community's major source of discord, erupting not only as an ideological battle ground but as a generational conflict. For instance, the narrator recalls the debate over the Goan community's role in African nationalism which once ensued between his father and the committed socialist, Pius Cota. Pius effectively defeats the father's policy of non-interference "in someone else's fight" (*IBM* 11) by shifting the question of political involvement from the older to the younger generation. In other words, he enables D'Souza to reconceptualize his identity not in the father's semantics of the "immigrant race" but as "[. . .] part of the new generation, with roots here and with new ideas" (12). Once D'Souza realizes that European hegemony targets "coloured" people like him, his political awakening is crystallized in his identification with indigenous Africans: "I couldn't quite accept that all the 'white' people were superior to all of us 'coloured' people" (12).

If, as Ocaya-Lakidi suggests, *In a Brown Mantle* is the most realistic portrait of the "Asian's" identification with the African Independence struggle (96), Nazareth reminds his reader that anti-colonial resistance is an age-old tradition in the historical annals of South Asian peoples. As the object of multiple conquests, the Goan community serves as D'Souza's particularly striking case in point:

My father came to Damibia in the early nineteen-twenties from Goa, a small country within the continent of India. [. . .] Hardly anybody paid any attention to Goa until India decided a few years ago to re-conquer it from the Portuguese, who had ruled it for four hundred and fifty years. [. . .] The history of Goa is full of conquests and reconquests—rule by Hindu empire-builders, Moslem imperialists, and finally the Portuguese [. . .] One strand of the Goans always resisted, and the period of foreign rule is often interrupted for a few short years by independence, rule by the Goans themselves. (*IBM* 2-3)

Though D'Souza narrates his story from his exilic domicile in a frigid London rooming house, his transhistorical perspective can be seen as part and parcel of his diasporic condition, one which has resulted in a split subjectivity (mirroring Meena's "dual focus") given his hybrid positionings between multiple master narratives. As such, D'Souza ironically calls attention to his own relative perspective as a now thrice-removed minority (that is, a Goan minority within a dominant "Indian" diaspora; an "Asian" minority in Africa; and a "visible minority" among the European populace). Though D'Souza's perspective is often filtered through the loosely veiled guise of what Simatei amusingly refers to as a "sloganeering socialist" (117), the protagonist's multiply positioned identity between variously conflicting allegiances ironizes his penchant for didacticism. The use of the "confessional" as his chosen mode of discourse further accentuates his narrative ambiguity, for it implicitly brings to view the disjunction between the narrator's convictions and his actions. Thus, D'Souza's indictment against the unprincipled actions of his leaders is neither proven nor disproven, but subtly counterpoised by D'Souza's own downwardly spiralling narrative of political corruption and moral bankruptcy.

For D'Souza, then, the "dual focus" is perceptible as an "internally dialogic" narrative strategy (Bakhtin, quoted in Young, 21): i.e., D'Souza's narrative functions as a self-reflexive debate (with his conscience) and as an outwardly projected scrutinization of his alter egos; that is, the Goan socialist, Pius Cota, and the African nationalist, Robert Kyeyune, the political leaders with which he most closely identifies. In a society overrun by a history of racial politics, D'Souza's narrative authority unfolds as an epistemic disparity between utterance and meaning in the Bakhtinian sense of an "authorial unmasking [. . .] through a language that is double-accented [. . .]" (Young 20).

When D'Souza resorts to a racial discourse, it is undercut by his self-conscious awareness of race as a politically expedient category, and vice versa. Consequently, D'Souza's own epistemology of race occurs as an unresolved internal debate. This is poignantly captured in the following example where he resorts to racial/racist epithets even as he questions whether or not race can satisfactorily account for differences in human behaviour: "Trying to generalize is futile [. . .]. Was this difference between Kyeyune and myself purely a personal difference? Or was it a racial difference? Is it true, as somebody has said, that Africans are short-visioned and only live in the present whereas Asians are long-visioned and only live in eternity?" (*IBM* 56).

D'Souza's interrogation of "race" as fact or fiction culminates in his growing discomfort with the nativist discourse underlying African nationalism. In Nazareth's portrait of new African leaders such as Kyeyune, there is an underlying caution



against Négritude's essentialist racial diatribe. D'Souza admits, therefore, that despite his admiration of Kyeyune's idealism, he distrusts him for being "radical in the typical African manner. He claimed to be left-wing but did not confine his attack to mere systems: he also attacked the races and individuals who were part of those systems. He did not attack only Exploitation—he attacked Asian Exploiters" (25). Similarly, D'Souza rejects the kind of primitivist argument expounded by *The Cow* (a loosely veiled caricature of Idi Amin), which nostalgically extols the virtues of Africa's "grand and glorious" past:

There is something curious about racial oppression. Those races that have suffered tend to idealise their past, to believe that before they were ruled or oppressed or exploited by another race [. . .] they lived together like brothers and sisters, sharing everything, and were one big happy family. [. . .] It was this vision of Paradise Lost that *The Cow* exploited. (74)

D'Souza explicitly denounces Négritude's primitivization of black identity in its uncritical reliance on Manichean binaries. By extension, the increasingly racialized nativist discourse of the rising African leadership is shown to be embedded in a colonial system which has promoted a separatist politics:

The colonial government had already seen the writing on the wall, it had felt the wind of change, and it had now changed its tactics. Instead of denouncing Africans as savages incapable of ruling themselves, thus providing a moral basis for continued rule, the colonial Government had now turned round and begun claiming that her rule had been one long training session so that the Africans could eventually rule themselves. (23)

D'Souza's growing disillusionment with the colonial policy of divide and rule, even as it interferes in the makings of the post-colonial state, mirrors what Elder refers to as the call for "native paramountcy":

After the First World War, when both anti-European and pro-European sentiments in Kenya were speeding toward revolution, the cry for 'native paramountcy' was raised repeatedly by white settlers and encouraged by Winston Churchill [. . .] this sudden concern with African rights was offered as a justification for denying Indians equal citizenship with whites and free entry into the colony. Clearly, it served the useful purpose of undermining the collective strength of the non-European populations. ("Indian Writing" 118)

Indeed, Robert Kyeyune, the up-and-coming President who has thus far favoured D'Souza as his right-hand man, begins to adopt the call to "native paramouncy" in his facilitation of The Cow's ascension to a ministerial post as well as his own rising persona as the voice of the people.

On the one hand, D'Souza challenges The Cow's openly racist discourse by debunking his nativist argument: "I know that your tribe came to Damibia from across the border to escape persecution from the Belgians. I'll go to Goa the day you go back to the Congo. And the day all immigrant tribes in Africa move back to where they came from'" (*IBM* 75). On the other hand, D'Souza is unable to reconcile Kyeyune's espousal of a nativist view of Africa with his earlier drive to ensure a pluricultural constitution.

Fanon is not surprisingly singled out as the prophetic voice informing D'Souza's realization of the country's shift from a colonial to a neocolonial reality, insidiously facilitated by a western-educated elite: "[. . .] you must have learnt all your left-wing talk from left-wing English country clubs! And your experience of society is petty bourgeois Goan society!" (67). D'Souza's disillusionment is thus not with "the people" but with the African elite's complicity with European economic interests. To this end, Nazareth's novel reflects what the author/critic refers to as a

common trend in Ugandan Literature: namely, its thematization of post-coloniality as a symbolic anticipation of a power-hungry figure such as “an Amin” (“Waiting for Amin” 9). Indeed, *In a Brown Mantle* poignantly opens to newspaper headlines announcing an assassination attempt on the nation’s first President, thereby alluding to the post-colonial moment not as a promising turn of events but as yesterday’s news, an elusive thing of the past, a non-event.

The post-colonial state is thus poetically referred to as “a machine of perpetual immobility” (*IBM* 109) in which it is not only the “Mr. Browns” of East Africa who are the figurative still-borns of the nascent African nation, but all those disenfranchised by its self-serving elite. As a member of the now corrupt body politic, therefore, D’Souza’s final gesture is an ironic declaration of love for his African homeland as its “bastard son”: “‘Goodbye, Mother Africa,’ I said, as the plane lifted off. ‘Your bastard son loved you’” (150). D’Souza’s hybrid self-image is a befittingly comic last word for a multiply positioned and multiply split progeny of the new African nation. On the one hand, the image of the “bastard” reminds the reader that this is, after all, D’Souza’s “confessional” of wrongdoing. In the same breath, it is an accusation directed at his society’s “delegitimization” of one its members (an accusation that is made all the more poignant in light of the fact that D’Souza’s kith and kin have been rejected at the proverbial “birth of the nation”). Finally, it is an allusion to his own hybrid identity not only as a diasporic subject but as an inescapable part of a pluricultural/multi-racial Africa.

In her essay, "South African Fiction in Transition," Elleke Boehmer contends that South African fiction written in the 1980s--that is, the last decade of apartheid--reveals a common pattern among narrative endings: i.e., they are punctuated by death, near-death, departure or escape. Boehmer attributes this pattern to a narrative uncertainty that involved "an unwillingness or an inability to comment on what might follow. [. . .] a refusal even to go as far as anticipating any ultimate end and therefore any possibility of a new beginning [. . .]" (50). To a certain extent, this is true for both Nazareth and Karodia's novels, each of which is set in a period of political transition between seemingly complicit forms of hegemonic rule. *In a Brown Mantle* thus ends with D'Souza's escape to London, as well as his prediction that an idealist like Kyeyune will share a similar exilic fate; *Daughters of the Twilight* ends with Yasmin's desertion of her child and family, the narrative thereby punctuated by the cautionary note that for romantic idealists such as Yasmin, "'this place is like a desert'," a desert in which "It won't be long before they'll be back again with their dogs and their guns" (*IBM* 150).

Stylistically, however, these novels could not convey their messages more differently. Karodia's drier, understated prose reflects the narrator's quiet sense of despair in the early stages of what would continue to be Apartheid's unrelenting forms of racial and economic oppression. As her narrative motions toward gestures of racial and cultural collaboration that resist utopic visions of interracial harmony, her prose is only sparingly punctuated by celebrations of the delicately interwoven patterns of colour in the South African landscape:

The orange orb suspended above the distant horizon had turned the bleached grass into a field of fire. As it dipped below the mountains it splattered the sky with pinks, softening the colours on the ground until the thorn scrub spread out lilac shadows. Then, as it dipped even lower, those lilac shadows ran together in dusky hues. (DT 119)

In contrast, Nazareth's humorous text, set in the purportedly liberatory post-colonial moment, comes across not only as a wry comment on the still-born aspirations of nascent post-colonial states, but also as an ironic "unmasking" of the narrator's own "authorship"--that is, as a narrative strategy of resistance against one kind of "authoritarian" control for another.

*In a Brown Mantle* and *Daughters of the Twilight* seek to participate in the ongoing debate of African liberation struggles and thus form part of the canon of post-colonial African literature. Wedged precariously between often complicit and competing master narratives, however, these texts deploy the diasporic subject's "twilight" or "inbetween" state as a relative perspective which not only debunks the narrative authority of the post-colonial moment but also opens up the discourse of identity and belonging in (self-)interrogative terms. Given their perspectives as both a distinct ethno-cultural entity within greater African society as well as a politically marginalized minority therein, these writers expose the "construct" of racial difference while simultaneously articulating a diasporic poetics of a multiply positioned identity.

In Nazareth's repeated claim that "there is no such thing as a single Asian community in East Africa" ("The Asian Presence" 23), one finds the diasporic subject's self-conscious affirmation of the heterogeneity of experience, even in those

cases where diasporic peoples envision themselves “in racist fictions of purity” (Mishra, “The Diasporic Imaginary” 423). In other words, these texts espouse an alternate politics of inclusion that rejects both assimilationist and exclusivist doctrines in the evocation of difference not as a basis for discrimination but as a shared feature of community. Poised as their protagonists are on the brink of major political upheaval, neither Karodia nor Nazareth offer idealistic solutions to state oppression; rather, each of their narratives motions toward a way out of hegemony in the evocation of common historical patterns of exclusion that seemingly disparate and disunited peoples share.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> South Asian trade and, to a lesser degree, settlement, along the East African coast dates as far back as the first century A.D. Upon their arrival in Zanzibar in the nineteenth century, British officials must have noticed the ease with which South Asian and Arab settlers conducted their daily trade under the Sultanate's authority, a trade which included slavery. As I have indicated in my chapter on Mauritius, South Asians were also used as slaves alongside their African counterparts in French colonies. (See Michael Twaddle's "East African Asians," Hugh Tinker's "Indian Emigration" and Charles Ponnuthurai Sarvan's "Ethnicity and Alienation.")

<sup>2</sup> See Dent Ocaya-Lakidi's "Black Attitudes to the African Asian," Twaddle's "East African Asians," and Peter Nazareth's numerous critical discussions of African-Asian relations.

<sup>3</sup> Indian independence has exerted a considerable impact on group dynamics and realignments throughout the diaspora. In the African context, many migrants also retained Indian citizenship.

<sup>4</sup> Nazareth and Ngũgĩ became acquainted while they were students at the Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. See Tirop P. Simatei's *The Novel and the Politics of Nation Building in Africa* or Bernth Lindfors's interview with Nazareth for further discussions of the Ngũgĩ-Nazareth connection.

<sup>5</sup> "Asian" was the official racial category created by the British East African Protectorate to refer to people of South Asian descent. "Indian" was the equivalent classification in South Africa. Nazareth and Karodia resist these homogenizing labels in their emphasis on the particular ethnic/regional backgrounds of their South Asian characters.

<sup>6</sup> As Table I in the "Introduction" indicates, the population of people deemed of "Asian" or "Indian" descent has plummeted from approximately one hundred thousand each in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda to less than one percent of the greater population since each nation's rise to independence in the early sixties. Uganda became independent in 1962, under the leadership of Milton Obote (Nazareth's figure

of Robert Kyeyune in *In a Brown Mantle* is a thinly veiled fictionalization of Obote and his ascension to power.)

<sup>7</sup> Ngũgĩ's *Weep Not, Child* depicts the Mau Mau Rebellion against British imperial rule in his native Kenya. The Mau Mau was a Gikuyu-led movement, the tribe to which Ngũgĩ belongs.

<sup>8</sup> One only has to think of the repeated stereotypical images of the servile Indian or usurious merchant in such works as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* or Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*, not to mention Hollywood's perpetuation of these stereotypes. As I will illustrate in this chapter, the derogatory view of the South Asian immigrant as a "coolie" in European Literature is directly challenged in Karodia's *Daughters of the Twilight*.

<sup>9</sup> See K. Laxmi Narayan's "Demographic Overview." See also Jan Jelmert's Jorgensen's *Uganda: A Modern History*.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Ugandan Literature has been recently graced by the 2001 publication of Jameela Siddiqi's first novel *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, the first female perspective of the 1972 Asian expulsion. Siddiqi resides in England but her novel is set entirely in her native Uganda. (See Peter Nazareth's review of same in the 2002 issue of *World Literature Today*, p.85-86.)

<sup>11</sup> The Goan community is a diaspora in and of itself. Located on the south-eastern coast of the Indian Subcontinent, Goa was a Portuguese colony for four hundred and fifty years, only becoming part of post-independence India in 1961. Goans are known to reject the label "Indian," and are simultaneously considered to be the most Europeanized of South Asian peoples given the Portuguese policy of assimilation together with its stringent policy of conversion to Roman Catholicism. Goans are almost 40% Roman Catholic. Gujratis are a particularly important group in the African context given their ancient history of trade along the East African coastal regions. Chinese artefacts such as blue and white porcelain are said to have been transported on Gujrati ships during the medieval period. Gujrat is a major state in the north-western Indian Subcontinent; it is a majority Muslim area.



<sup>12</sup> A great many indentured labourers in South Africa remained behind after the termination of their contracts. They came to be known as “freed labourers” (See Hilda Kuper’s *Indian People in Natal*.) It is unclear whether Karodia’s character Abdul arrived as a labourer or as a free passenger who worked alongside freed labourers. In either case, it is significant that his lot was thrown in with the labourers he worked among.

<sup>13</sup> Nazareth’s *In a Brown Mantle* will be abbreviated as *IBM* throughout this chapter. Unfortunately, the novel is out of print. Peter Nazareth was kind enough to provide me with a copy of his novel for the purposes of my research. His second novel, *The General is Up* is readily available in Canada where it was reprinted by TSAR in Toronto.

<sup>14</sup> Nazareth states in an interview with Bernth Lindfors that he completed the novel in January 1970; it was published in 1972. (See “Interview with Peter Nazareth.”)

<sup>15</sup> See Peter Nazareth’s comments about the circumstances surrounding his novel’s publication in his survey article “Waiting for Amin: Two Decades of Ugandan Literature.”

<sup>16</sup> The factors contributing to Idi Amin Dada’s expulsion edict are the source of much debate among scholars and critics. (See *Expulsion of a Minority: Essays on Ugandan Asians*.) Most agree, however, that the seeds of discontent were sown well before his military-backed coup against President Milton Obote in 1971. Amin’s regime lasted from 1971-1979. (See Jorgensen’s *Uganda: A Modern History*.)

<sup>17</sup> The only other novels focusing on the South Asian diaspora in East Africa produced at this time were David Rubadiri’s *No Bride Price* (1967) and Behadar Tejani’s *Day After Tomorrow* (1971).

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Max Dorsinville’s discussion of the “mad king” in Haitian Literature in his critical edition/translation of Roger Dorsinville’s novels: *The Rule of François (“Papa Doc”) Duvalier in Two Novels by Roger Dorsinville*.

<sup>19</sup> Apartheid came into being with the election of the National Party in 1948. South Africa repealed its apartheid laws in 1991; in 1994, South Africa entered a new phase

in its history with the election of Nelson Mandela. (See T.R.H. Davenport's *South Africa: A Modern History*; see also Roger Ormond's *The Apartheid Handbook*.)

<sup>20</sup> By 1985, 91.3 per cent of Indians had been evicted from their business premises; similarly, those classified as "Coloured" constituted the highest percentage of families that were moved from their homes (66%), followed by Indians (32%). (See Ormond's *The Apartheid Handbook*.)

<sup>21</sup> Farida Karodia's *Daughters of the Twilight* will be abbreviated as *DT* throughout this chapter. This novel is also sadly out of print.

<sup>22</sup> To date, Arlene A. Elder's "Indian Writing in East and South Africa: Multiple Approaches to Colonialism and Apartheid" is the only other existing survey of South Asian Diasporic Literature, besides my own, to compare the Eastern and Southern African contexts to date.

<sup>23</sup> See Arun Mukherjee's discussion of the tension between post-modernism and post-colonialism in "Whose Post-colonialism and Whose Postmodernism?"

<sup>24</sup> See Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and Ngũgĩ's "The Language of African Literature."

<sup>25</sup> See Gyatri Charavorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

<sup>26</sup> See Nazareth's discussion of Behadur Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow* in "Waiting for an Amin: Two Decades of Ugandan Literature."

<sup>27</sup> One of the first laws to be established under the apartheid regime was The Immorality Amendment Act of 1957, which "forbade 'unlawful carnal intercourse'" or marriage between a white person on the one hand and an African, Indian or Coloured on the other" (Ormond, *The Apartheid Handbook* 26).

<sup>28</sup> See Homi Bhabha's paradigm of hybridity as an implicit strategy of resistance in "Signs Taken For Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817." See also Robert Young's discussion of hybridity as a key concept in colonial discourse in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in theory, culture and race*.)

<sup>29</sup> See Zoe Wicomb's "Shame and Identity," p.93.

## **PART III - The Caribbean Region**

## Chapter 4 - Guyana

**A Question of Cultural Conviction for 'This time generation':  
The Rural and Urban Indo-Guyanese Response to  
Contemporary Caribbean Experience in  
Rooplall Monar's *Janjhat* and Narmala Shewcharan's *Tomorrow is Another Day***

In his discussion of the African diaspora, Stuart Hall jokes that the Asian presence in the Caribbean reveals the paradoxical truth of Columbus's mistaken impression that he had, in fact, arrived in the "Indies" in 1492. As Hall ironically comments, "you *can* find 'Asia' by sailing west" ("Cultural Identity" 395). Similarly, from his own vantage point as a Caribbean writer, Derek Walcott marvels not merely over the ubiquitous presence of South Asian peoples in the Caribbean region but the poetic resonance of their cultural conviction despite the process of transplantation and the history of indentured labour. Musing over an Indo-Trinidadian performance of the *Ramleela*, a dramatization of the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, Derek Walcott writes:

I misread the event through a visual echo of History—the cane fields, indenture, the evocation of vanished armies, temples, and trumpeting elephants—when all around me there was quite the opposite: elation, delight in the boys' screams, in the sweet stall, in more and more costumed characters appearing; a delight of conviction, not loss. ("The Antilles" 295)

Indeed, between 1838 (a few short years after the abolition of slavery) and 1917 (the official end of indenture), approximately half a million indentured labourers arrived in the British Empire's Caribbean colonies. These included the smaller islands of Jamaica, Grenada, St. Vincent and Walcott's native St. Lucia, but by far the most visible presence was to be found in Guyana, South America, and its closest Caribbean island-neighbour, Trinidad. Mirroring the other island colonies of

the Empire, the South Asian diasporic communities of the Caribbean were primarily composed of indentured labourers brought in by the plantocracy to replace freed African slaves. At the end of their contracts, a staggering seventy-five percent of these immigrants chose to remain in the Caribbean: some because of the expense of the return passage "home" or because of the numerous other financial and technical obstacles with which they were so often confronted<sup>1</sup>; some because of the agonizing prospect of the interminable sea voyage back to the Indian Subcontinent; and some because of the earnest desire to settle on the new land.

Though neither Indo-Guyanese nor Indo-Trinidadian writers speak of a minority experience, the former can boast of their earlier arrival in the region, albeit by a margin, as well as of an ethnic majority status that has sustained itself for almost a century. In fact, by the turn of the twentieth century, Guyana's census revealed that the South Asian diasporic community constituted the largest ethnic group therein (42 percent of the total population); by the 1960s they constituted a slim majority of the country's population (50.2 percent of the total population).<sup>2</sup>

The unusual concentration of South Asian diasporic peoples within an equally anomalous English-speaking South American country makes Guyana's position in Latin America quite unique. Indeed, as one of Britain's major plantation colonies in the Americas--one which relied on a labour force of African slaves, South Asian indentured labourers and, to a lesser extent, Chinese immigrants--Guyana continues to identify itself as an extension of the Caribbean region, particularly to the nations of the former "West Indies." Though the Dutch were the first to establish a colony along the Guyana coast (which also includes present-day Surinam and French Guiana), sociologist Mohammed A. Rauf contends that since its colonization by European

powers, “the unbroken account of Guyanese history [. . .] begins with the occupation of the colony by the English in 1831” (*Indian Village* 30).

Guyana is also historically linked to the Caribbean archipelago in terms of its Amerindian populations. In fact, in spite of the genocide carried out against Amerindian peoples since Columbus’s arrival and the subsequent tendency to exclude indigenous cultures in discussions of contemporary Caribbean society, Amerindians such as the Caribs and Arawaks<sup>3</sup> still maintain a modest minority status in present-day Guyana. In this sense, Guyana’s most renowned author to date, Wilson Harris, casts indigenous peoples at the centre of the Guyanese “cross-cultural imagination.” Having said this, it should be noted that, to date, Indo-Guyanese writers rarely evoke the voices, characters and histories of indigenous peoples. Cyril Dabydeen is one of the few such writers to illustrate the imprint of indigenous civilizations on the Indo-Guyanese consciousness. Indeed, his writing brings to bear a thematic echo between the indigenous peoples of his native Guyana and those of Canada, where he has lived for several decades.<sup>4</sup>

Guyana, itself an Amerindian word for “land of water,” has come to be known as the “Land of Six Peoples,” which includes Indigenous, African, European, East Indian, Chinese and Portuguese groups.<sup>5</sup> “East Indian” has been the term deployed throughout the British Caribbean to describe peoples of South Asian origins. It is a peculiar legacy of Caribbean history which once again recalls Columbus’s epic blunder: i.e., since Columbus’s arrival in the purported “Indies,” the indigenous peoples of the American continent have been referred to as “Indians,” a misnomer which caused some consternation upon the arrival of the indentured labourers of the veritable “Indian” Subcontinent. The term “East Indian” was thus coined to

distinguish between the immigrants from the “east” and the misnamed indigenous groups of the Americas. To complicate matters, the term “West Indian” came to refer to the British colonies of the Caribbean, thereby resulting in a further distinction between “East” and “West” Indians (the former associated with the South Asian diaspora and the latter with the African diaspora).

Today, many Caribbean scholars and writers of South Asian origins have done away with the rigid ethnic distinction implied by “East Indian.” Instead, “Indo-Caribbean” is in wider usage as the label of choice, for it highlights a multiply positioned diasporic consciousness rooted in Indian Subcontinental history and a hybrid identity that has taken form in the Caribbean over almost two centuries. To this end, Caribbean scholar and critic Frank Birbalsingh finds the latter term presents a more adequate reflection of the process of indigenization of South Asian culture in the Caribbean region; he also suggests that it better foregrounds the fact that South Asian peoples have simultaneously maintained an ethnic identity that is distinct from a dominant “creole” culture grounded in Christianity and largely “western” cultural norms influenced as much by Europe as North America<sup>6</sup> and an increasingly politicized pan-African consciousness. As Cyril Dabydeen remarks: “the South Asian/Indo-Caribbean voice is still marginal. [. . .] Indeed, ethnicity is a key marker; it’s what sometimes feeds our work, where we find the particularities, even the resonance, for what we create.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Birbalsingh suggests that the South Asian diaspora in the Caribbean is no different from other immigrant groups, be they in the Caribbean or abroad, whose literatures have been influenced by historical circumstances and their bearing on ethnic configurations.



British imperial history has played no small part in forging ethnic delineations and group dynamics. As Brian Moore suggests, up to the nineteenth century Guyana was a highly “ethnically compartmentalized society” (*Cultural Power, Resistance, and Pluralism* 307), not only “because each immigrant group tried to preserve its own exclusive institutions and values” (306) but also because of the division of labour among ethnic groups under a colonial plantation system. Like their Indo-Caribbean counterparts, Indo-Guyanese writers tend to focus on the South Asian diasporic subjects’ religious beliefs and cultural values as they are seen to be at odds with Christian, Black and Creole identity. They also bring to the fore the legacy of racial segregation instituted under a colonial plantation system and carried over to the present in the division of labour between the largely urbanized “Afro-Caribbean” and rural “Indo-Caribbean” populations.

For the most part, therefore, the South Asian diasporic writer’s principal catalyst for creative expression has been the relatively untold history of indenture and the unique sense of cultural displacement felt by the Indo-Caribbean plantation community. As a handful of the first generation of Indo-Guyanese writers illustrate, plantation estate or village life are central concerns for the descendants of indentured labourers. Indeed, the editors of the first major anthology of Indo-Guyanese Literature suggest that the largely rural setting of the community might account for the late emergence of the Indo-Guyanese novel itself, particularly in comparison to Caribbean literary production and, more specifically, Indo-Trinidadian writing: “[. . .] a sociological explanation might point to the later access of the Indo-Guyanese community to education, the narrower base of professional elite and the fact that a far

higher production of the community remained in the sugar industry or in the rural villages” (Benjamin et al, *They Came in Ships* 107).

The indentured community in the Caribbean found themselves in an uncomfortable position between the recently freed African slaves and the European plantocracy. This position should not be confused with the duplicitous “middle man” label<sup>8</sup> that stigmatized the South Asian trader/merchant in East or South Africa, but it was nonetheless rife with similar consequences of social and cultural ostracism that would have been felt well after decolonization. As Birbalsingh explains, there are several factors which account for the South Asian immigrant’s strained position between African, European and Creole peoples. First, South Asians brought with them altogether alien “languages, customs, religions, dress and culture in an English-speaking, Christian society” (Introduction, *Jahaji* xi) and in a creolized culture bearing African roots. Second, in their exclusive function as a workforce bound to the bidding of the European plantocracy, they were quickly branded as political deterrents in the African’s “justifiable demands for social and political change” (xii).

And, as in the other colonies of the Empire, the indentured labourers were perpetually haunted by the “coolie” stereotype, replete with its association with a lower caste which, when divorced from Hindu society, translated into the stigma of a subordinate or lower social rung. As Benjamin et al suggest, the history of Indo-Guyanese literature is in many ways the history of the Indo-Guyanese writer’s confrontation with the “coolie” stereotype, whereby the “East Indian” and “coolie” have often been used as virtually synonymous terms, irrespective of the South Asian diasporic subject’s social standing or professional credentials. In other words, the earliest examples of Indo-Guyanese writing sought to contend with the dehumanizing

legacy of indenture history, one which begins with the pejorative connotations of the coolie stereotype.

Indo-Guyanese writers nonetheless echo the motifs and thematics of Caribbean literature in their emphasis on the recent memory of colonization and anti-colonial struggle; in their depictions of neo-imperial hegemony; in their oft-echoed articulation of the exilic or immigrant experience in the western metropolis; in their narrativization of a fragmented memory as a symptom of dislocation; in their personification of a lush tropical landscape; in their use of Creole as the language of speech and/or narration, etc. One might say that these are the generally overlapping concerns of the diasporic Caribbean writer. However, Indo-Guyanese and Indo-Trinidadian writers tend to part company with their diasporic counterparts not only in their narrativization of indenture history but also of the post-colonial moment as an uneasy response to the now dominant Afro-Caribbean or Creole culture. As the older generation of Rooplall Monar's Indo-Guyanese community lament, "[. . .] the world of sacred ceremonies [are] threatened by creole ways" (*Janjhat* 54).

As I have indicated, however, this is not to suggest that the Indo-Caribbean community is a monolithic and homogenous entity which categorically resists a creole aesthetic. On the contrary, the processes of transculturation and integration are as much a part of Indo-Caribbean experience as are the atavistic resonances of a distant cultural past: for instance, religious syncretism is evident in the Indo-Caribbean's identification with certain aspects of Obeah or, again, in the "carnivalization" of the Muslim Hosay Festival (the traditionally somber Islamic observance of Muharram); linguistic hybridization is most strongly evident in the

mixing of various forms of Creole with Hindi/Bhojpuri lexical elements; items of consumption such as food and pop culture are rife with examples of hybridization; and, of course, inter-racial mixing is the most outward expression of a “shared” creole identity. In the spirit of cultural hybridization, the Indo-Guyanese residents depicted throughout Rooplall Monar’s oeuvre are shown to break into “a mixture of Hindi melodies and creole rhymes” (*Janjhat* 38); similarly, both Rooplall Monar and Narmala Shewcharan underline the unity of peoples “who have passed through the estate experience of slavery and indenture” (Poynting, Introduction 10).

What is unique to South Asian diasporic peoples in the Caribbean context, therefore, is the extent to which a distinct cultural identity has been maintained in the process of transplantation, over several generations, and in spite of the processes of colonization, assimilation and creolization. The parallels with Trinidad are therefore most readily apparent in the Indo-Guyanese writer’s emphasis on a group whose core sociocultural values, together with a common history of indenture, have helped transcend intra-communal differences, at least in relation to wider Caribbean society. Indo-Guyanese writers such as Rooplall Monar and Sheikh M. Sadeek, like their Indo-Trinidadian counterparts Lakshmi Persaud and Sharlow Mohammed, thus belong to the first wave of writers to give voice, in first-hand accounts, to the descendants of indentured peoples and their community-oriented existence.

However, a younger generation of authors such as Narmala Shewcharan and Harishchandra Khemraj signal a new stage in Indo-Guyanese fiction (and Indo-Caribbean literature), in their depictions of the diasporic subject’s participation “in the society as a whole” (Benjamin et al 110). Indeed, this younger generation of writers underscore the growing trend away from the communal existence of their

ancestors. In other words, they signal an important shift in Indo-Guyanese writing that mirrors the changes to have taken place in Caribbean nations themselves: first, the industrialization of the plantation economy and its subsequent disruption of the estate community is evidenced in the younger generation's exodus to urban centres; second; greater access to education (with its predominantly colonial curriculum) has further distanced the younger generation from the beliefs, languages and values of their more tradition-bound elders; and third, the increased level of emigration to Europe and North America for higher education and employment has inalterably widened the gulf between young and old.

The differences between a rural and progressively urbanized diasporic community, together with the growing gulf between older and younger generations, are brought to light in a comparative look at Rooplall Monar's *Janjhat* (1989) and Narmala Shewcharan's *Tomorrow is Another Day* (1994). These novels are strikingly different in setting, tone and style, but their works point to a development in the Indo-Guyanese novel from an earlier generation's focus on the secluded estate community to a younger generation's more politicized interest in urban Guyanese society.

Monar and Shewcharan also present different linguistic innovations and trends in Indo-Guyanese and Caribbean fiction. For example, Monar uses a version of creolized English that is steeped in the syntax, vocabulary and rhythm of Hindi/Bhojpuri. Using this particular version of Creole as both the language of character and consciousness, Monar can be seen to push further "the possibilities of language" (Ramchand, *West Indian Novel* 96) in Caribbean and English literature.<sup>9</sup> *Janjhat* is perhaps the first novel to employ Indo-Guyanese Creole as the language of dialogue and consciousness. Monar's explicit use of Hindi/Urdu terminology (such as

*Janjhat*, a Hindi/Urdu term for “an unnecessary problem”), without an accompanying glossary, also suggests that South Asian languages have come to constitute an indelible part of the vocabulary and flavour of a polyglot identity. Creolization thus reflects the “cross-cultural” spectrum of Guyanese society, one which is evident in the presence of Hindi/Urdu vocabulary in Creole, in the anglicization of Hindi, Urdu or Bhojpuri expressions as well as in the hybridization of South Asian lexical and syntactical elements with English vocabulary, such as the pattern of emphatic word-doubling found in “tru-tru” (*Janjhat* 10).

Shewcharan has also stretched the contours of English-language fiction to include Indo-Guyanese creole as both the language of speech and narration in her short story “Janjhat: Bhola Ram and the ‘Going Away Plan’.” In her novel, however, Creole functions as a diglossic language that is employed as a mark of class distinction. In keeping with the use of English as the language of “officialdom” and, by extension, the formal basis of narration, Creole is associated with informal, colloquial speech. Moreover, in a multi-racial urban context, Shewcharan’s characters utilize a form of Creole that functions as the *lingua franca* of Guyanese peoples, rather than the particular brand of Creole spoken by the Indo-Guyanese community.

These novels also share a thematic emphasis on post-independence Guyanese society from a shared South Asian diasporic perspective. Published only a few years apart and set in the Burnham years of Guyana’s recent political history,<sup>10</sup> each novel explores the gender, generational and class differences that make up the South Asian diasporic subject’s response to a rapidly changing society and its downwardly spiralling economy. In bringing to the fore an Indo-Guyanese/South Asian diasporic perspective, these novels consider the role that diasporic experience necessarily plays

in the individual's response to and potential influence over his or her changing sociopolitical landscape. In other words, they foreground diasporic identity-formation in a post-colonial context as a processual interrelationship between the individual, the diasporic community and the state.

In this complex equation, the subaltern female assumes a doubly symbolic role as both the preserver of the diasporic community's tradition as well as the often unwitting symbol of assimilation to a dominant and often hostile body politic, a binary which further exposes complicit forms of patriarchy. Monar and Shewcharan thus present a challenging voice in Indo-Caribbean fiction in their feminist investigations of gender within ethnically and racially deployed identity politics. To this end, Monar proves to be a laudable exception within a literary tradition that has generally stereotyped South Asian diasporic female characters in its "typical passive-victim focus" (Poynting "You Want to be a Coolie Woman?" 101).

Similarly, in her cross-sectional portrait of Indo-Guyanese women, each of whom confronts the political and economic hardships of post-independence Guyana from conflicting class-based and generational perspectives, Shewcharan resists an essentialist feminist discourse which oversimplifies the "postcolonial Woman" as "a metaphor for 'the good'" (Suleri 246) or as a dehistoricized symbol of victimhood. In fact, Shewcharan's novel breaks with a tradition of writing by Caribbean women wherein "first novels" often take the form of fictional autobiography.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the journalistic flavour of Shewcharan's political novel is reminiscent of the traditionally male-dominated genre of the "political post-colonial dystopia" (Skinner 177),<sup>12</sup> though it immediately transcends generic codification in its investigation of the

historically specific setting of Guyana's recent political history from multiple Indo-Guyanese perspectives.

Monar and Shewcharan also write against a colonial narrative which contends that indenture served as a form of liberation from a repressive Hindu patriarchy and its caste system.<sup>13</sup> In *Janjhat*, for instance, the older generation recall the common patterns of violence against women to which colonial authorities turned a blind eye, thereby challenging continued assertions that "the early period of indenture resulted in an improved status and mobility for the majority of South Asian women, relative to that in India" (Seenarine 1). Similarly, both Monar and Shewcharan challenge existing arguments that the Indo-Guyanese peoples' low participation in education was due to communal insularity or gender-biased attitudes to education.<sup>14</sup> Rather, in the recurring motif of regret over the inaccessibility of education or, indeed, the futility of education in light of the limited chances of "occupational mobility" (Bacchus 162), these texts illustrate the more realistic perception among Indo-Guyanese peoples that education and its rewards are usually reserved for the privileged few.

To this end, the rural community reveres its educated members; conversely, for those whose immediate needs often outweigh future hopes education is a painful source of inner conflict and regret: "'Estate work ain't get a future,' he told himself, cursing his fate, wondering why he couldn't take education" (*Janjhat* 62). Furthermore, in Shewcharan's more cynical urban community, education capitulates into an empty symbol of elitism in a system in which socioeconomic mobility is mainly fuelled by political patronage. Indeed, in a corrupt system that denies even its educated members access to equal opportunities, education is often seen as a means



of escape to “the richman’s country” (*TLAD* 75).<sup>15</sup> The recurring motif of the “brain drain” and the general exodus of Guyana’s younger citizens thus functions as a disruptive subtext throughout *Tomorrow is Another Day*, wherein the queues for immigration visas are as long as the “food lines.”

The thematization of the emigration patterns to have besieged Guyana since the sixties lends further import to the fact that Monar is one of the few writers among his generation to have remained in his native place of birth. As a twice-honoured recipient of the Guyana Prize for his short story collection, *Backdam People*, and his poetry collection, *Koker*,<sup>16</sup> Monar has made a significant and, I would argue, an innovative contribution to Guyanese Literature. Like most of his Indo-Guyanese contemporaries, Monar is the descendant of indentured labourers whose fiction turns to plantation estate life for its realistic texture and setting.

Though this rural backdrop is a common feature among the fictions of the first wave of writers, Monar’s compassionate and detailed thematization of plantation estate life is, as Birbalsingh asserts, a rare commodity, particularly among the better recognized Indo-Caribbean literary figures such as Samuel Selvon and V.S. Naipaul. In fact, Birbalsingh accurately contends that Monar’s “stories recreate Indo-Caribbean plantation society more accurately and vividly than has ever been done in fiction” (*From Pillar to Post* 51). In the same vein, Caribbean scholar and publisher Jeremy Poynting praises Monar’s fiction for having broken with a literary (and cultural) tradition that reinforces the negative “coolie” stereotype:

They are not the first attempt to describe estate life, but they are the first to achieve a perspective which balances a sympathetic inwardness with an objective detachment. [. . .] the image of estate life in the work of other Indo-Caribbean writers has been wholly negative. [. . .] It is also the case that some of those writers who had either

‘escaped’ from the estates or who were of higher caste, tended to look down on the estate dwellers and their ‘bung coolie culture.’ (Introduction, *Backdum People* 7-8)

Throughout his oeuvre, Monar pays homage to his community’s cultural resilience in spite of the demoralizing history of servitude and hardship embodied in the “coolie” stereotype, such that “the harshness of their lives is miraculously relieved by a vibrant comic sense that transforms Estate People from a solemn record of social protest into a tragic-comic extravaganza, unique in West Indian Literature” (Birbalsingh 53). Indeed, Monar’s vision of the Indo-Guyanese community is filtered through a uniquely sympathetic and feminist approach to the estate or village settlement.

Monar’s personal history on the Lusignan and Annandale Sugar Estates together with his varied background as an estate bookkeeper, a journalist and a practitioner of folk medicine are reflected in his judicious collation of the diverse voices of his community; his trained attention to the physical and psychological repercussions of plantation work; and his detailed account of the central role of socioreligious practices in the spiritual and emotional well-being of a community that has historically faced both economic privations and the psychological effects of cultural displacement.

At first glimpse, Monar’s novel is so vivid a portrait of the rural community that the politics of contemporary Guyanese society seem far removed from the daily concerns of people whose lives still revolve around “backdam wuk”—the same labour-intensive livelihood of their ancestors. Jeremy Poynting defines “backdam wuk” as follows:

The backdam was the distant part of the estate to which the workers had to walk up to five miles in the darkness of the early morning before they started work. But the backdam was also the place where the cultivation of the estate merged into the wilderness of the savannah and where the estate workers had the freedom to gather fruits and firewood and sometimes cultivate their own plots, [. . .]. (9)

Though Monar goes to great lengths throughout his oeuvre to realistically portray the plantation estate community, I would suggest that his thematic concerns transcend the legacies of indentured existence. In *Janjhat*, for instance, Monar subtly weaves the goings-on of the wider political fabric in and out of his narrative such that his novel is as much a realistic slice of village life as it is a loosely veiled political allegory of the first generation of Indo-Guyanese peoples to articulate their “independence” as a conscious struggle between the individual’s role in the diasporic community and his/her place in wider Guyanese society. Moreover, Monar’s equally critical awareness of gender and generational differences, which are often grounds for intra-communal conflict and repression, simultaneously challenges nostalgic and prejudicial oversimplifications of this otherwise complex, heterogeneous and ever-changing community.

In *Janjhat*, the changes taking place within the Lusignan and neighbouring plantation communities are subtly tied to wider Guyanese society. Indeed, through the consciousness of the older generation, Monar captures the structural changes that have occurred over the course of Guyana’s recent history, particularly the major structural shift from plantation estate communities to “new village settlements off the estates. (Poynting, Introduction 7). For the older generation who has straddled both the “close” quarters of estate “logies” and the more private, independent “Housing

Scheme" (*Janjhat* 72) of the village settlement, the changes in lifestyle are a continual source of internalized and externalized tension.

In addition to their restructured accommodations, the older generation is shown to straddle a colonial and post-colonial era which, among other things, has rendered obsolete the plantation estate system. Thus, when Big-Bye mooma, the principle spokesperson of the older generation declares, "'Eh, eh, since this country get freedom is everything changing overnight'" (*Janjhat* 14), her observation is less a hopeful celebration of independence as it is an ironic lament for the gradual disintegration of a heretofore insular and tight-knit community.

Monar's use of a traditional marriage plot—a narrative device that accrues even greater significance in the context of diasporic peoples for whom endogamy acts as the most viable insurance of cultural continuity<sup>17</sup>--deliberately plunges the reader amidst the community's false sense of security. In other words, their expectations of "a traditional marriage" are quickly disrupted by Data, the rebellious young bride. The marriage plot thus plays itself out as two principle dialectics of struggle: first, as a woman's resistance to a traditional patriarchal Hindu structure; second, as the broader debate over "assimilation versus tradition" that is echoed across Indo-Caribbean and, indeed, other diasporic societies.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, then, the disruption of the traditional marriage plot subverts a fixed patriarchal discourse in the female subaltern's struggle against her tradition-bound community; in turn, the subverted marriage plot accrues new symbolic resonance in a diasporic context in which the female subaltern's struggle against communal practices plays itself out as an assault on cultural identity in the state's growing influence over its younger constituency.

It is significant that Data's struggle is waged on the "home" front, the principle site in which the marriage contract ensures the uninterrupted transfer of heteronormative and patriarchal codes. In other words, home is a matriarchal domain insofar as it facilitates the dictates of tradition. In his consideration of the deployment of women as the bearers of tradition in Indian society, Partha Chatterjee states: "The world is the external [. . .] the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. [. . .] The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation" (120).<sup>19</sup> As I have already illustrated in my chapter on Mauritius, Chatterjee's paradigm is useful in apprehending a general trend in South Asian "diasporic" culture: namely, the particularly urgent imperative for women to act as the facilitators and symbols of cultural continuity when faced with the compromising effects of physical displacement, cultural marginalization and the prospect of assimilation.

Not surprisingly, then, Data's identity is limited to her function as "a good Hindu girl" (*Janjhat* 34) who accompanied her mother "to the Sunday morning pujas and other temple functions, and to the kathas and other ceremonies held in peoples' homes" (33). As a pun on the Indo-Guyanese-accented "daughter," Data's unwanted nickname comically reinforces the role that she is meant to dutifully fulfil. In this sense, Data's battle is directed against her tyrannically orthodox mother-in-law, Big Bye mooma, for it is upon the household matriarch's shoulders that the upkeep of tradition most heavily falls.

In contrast, Data's young husband, Big Bye, and his peers seem more preoccupied by sexual fantasies and chauvinistic posturing than religious or cultural observances. However, even though males have a distinct advantage in their less

“duty”-bound role as the more socially mobile members of their community, both genders are shown to play their part in the insurance of cultural continuity. In this sense, Data seeks to break not only herself but also Big Bye out of a position of subordination to an older generation; moreover, Big Bye is shown to be as beleaguered as his young bride by the constructs of propriety and the chauvinistic trappings of tradition: “‘A proper Hindu boy don’t do that wickedness,’ his mooma would say, as if she knew what was in his mind” (18).

Monar makes it clear that Data does not reject her identity as “a good Hindu girl” as much as she wishes to break out of a system that renders women continually dependent on others in their roles as “datas” (daughters) and “doolahins” (brides): “She didn’t want to be addressed as doolahin anymore. She didn’t want to be treated as a protected bride, fed, pampered and chided [. . .]” (135). Data’s struggle for independence problematizes Ramraj’s assertion that “Indo-Caribbean writers tend to focus on the experiences of the assimilationists, with whose lot they invariably sympathize” (“Assimilationist Indo-Caribbean Marginality” 80). Data neither retreats behind an exclusivist discourse nor seeks to reject community and family, the most indelible marks of her South Asian heritage. Rather, her assertion of independence is a “gradual and disciplined” (*Janjhat* 122) balance between the upkeep of tradition, the daily struggles of material survival and the possibility of cultural integration.

Data’s struggle for independence, therefore, acts as an allegory for the community’s fate in a post-independence era. In Data’s negotiation between selfhood and competing cultural codes, Monar seems to capture the community’s plight in its desire to remain autonomous without capitulating into its own forms of ideological absolutism and ethnic essentialism. In turn, Data’s emphasis on a form of material

self-sufficiency that is not so individualistic as to compromise core cultural/social values serves as an alternate model of “independence” in a progressively corrupt state. To this end, Monar’s novel addresses the inter-related “issues of national and racial and cultural identities” that Guyanese author Janice Shinebourne stresses as the necessary concerns of writers who emerged in the context of “an extremely rapid transition between revolutionary times and conservative, racial, chauvanistic nationalism” (“Twin Influences” 142).

For the diasporic community, therefore, the upkeep of tradition is not a private matter but a collective concern, nor merely a cultural occupation but a political statement. The marks of urbanization, industrialization, materialism and “Americanization” in a post-independence Guyana, together with a dominant Afro-Guyanese body politic, are viewed as the sources of corrosion to a core set of values and beliefs as they are encoded in everything from a woman’s dress to her concept of family life and her individual ambitions: “You hardly find a good Hindu woman today. Nice house full they eye. Is everybody come selfish after independence. No closeness anymore. Young gal want to live town life” (*Janjhat* 20).

As the primary bearer of tradition, then, the South Asian diasporic woman becomes the central symbol of change: she is an active agent of change in her conscious disruption of her tradition-bound role; she is also a passive symbol of a gradual break with tradition, for it is in her persona and actions that cultural continuity is gauged. It is important to note, then, that for the older generation, the changes brought about by the country’s independence are principally assessed in its growing influence over the community’s younger generation of women: “But these present-day young girls: too much lip-stick, high-heel shoe, short dress. [. . .] eh-eh.

going cinema, not doing regular puja [. . .]; ‘*This time generation quick to give you bad name. Them young gal fuget they culture and self-respect.*’” (13; 37; emphasis added).

Monar’s realistic account of a multi-generational Indo-Guyanese community closely reflects the processes of acculturation found in the diasporic context. As Mohammed A. Rauf concludes in his sociological study *Indian Village in Guyana*, “change” for the Indo-Guyanese community operates at the generational level as well as in terms of contact with other groups:

[. . .] the notion of cultural continuities and changes among East Indians in Guyana should be examined with reference to two major contexts: a) continuities and changes among East Indians as an ethnic group in relation to other groups; b) continuities and changes among East Indians at the generational level. The two contexts have a dialectical relationship with each other. Cultural continuities usually become the first victims of fragmentation as a result of increasing contact with other cultural segments at the descending generational levels, and yet the group as a whole needs these same cultural resources that it fragments for the maintenance of its distinctiveness and identity in the society. (106)

In Monar’s text, contact with other groups is no less potent because it transpires at a more discrete level in the form of media access, an “English” education and pop culture--the shared language of the imagined (national) community: “This radio and newspaper and commercial eddication destroying young people” (*Janjhat* 110).

Inter-ethnic and inter-cultural contact also occurs in the form of a growing trend of consumerism of both American- and Indian-imported products. The younger generation’s less restrictive working conditions in a post-plantation economy, as well as a modest diversification of labour, permits patterns of consumerism that the older generation could ill afford. In other words, the very terms and basis of contact are



themselves changing according to the community's material and historical circumstances.

For Big Bye mooma and her peers, therefore, individual endurance is inextricably tied to a sense of collective and spiritual solidarity which is most often achieved in the observance of religious and cultural ceremonies. Indeed, for Big Bye mooma's generation, religious rituals and cultural practices did not merely help preserve tradition but acted as a viable counter-culture to an oppressive plantation system. Thus, as Big Bye mooma looks back on the ravages of estate life--particularly for women who were subject not only to the drudgery of plantation labour but also to the threat of sexual exploitation<sup>20</sup>--a spiritually united front is its only redemptive feature.

Instead of bemoaning "backdam wuk," then, Big Bye mooma waxes nostalgic over the "estate days": "such days gave her life a meaning. They spiced its blandness; though they sharpened the nostalgia for living on the estate where every part of life revolved around the gods and their observance. [. . .] To deviate from that part was to find only emptiness, haunting memories, bereft of any glory or pride" (83). Similarly, for Big Bye mooma's male counterparts, drunken camaraderie and religious observances serve as the only antidote to the spiritual emptiness of plantation life: "Felt moments of happiness only when he was involved in the religious festivals or lost in sessions of rum-fired reminiscence" (55 *sic*).

The older generation thus evoke an ironic nostalgia, not for the distant "India" of the past but for the close quarters and shared experience of estate life. Indeed, the older generation does not look back to the "motherland" for a model of cultural preservation since India's entry into a globalized economy is itself a potential source

of cultural corrosion: "Is the Bombay film, and juke box responsible for that" (8). Consequently, the community is shown to stand anachronistically against both the motherland and the host society, for each now bears the marks of change that the older generation regards as the disintegration of the unique spiritual strength and communal bond of the plantation estate community.

It is significant, however, that Monar does not harness female subjectivity to an oppositional binary of generational conflict. In other words, Monar does not merely pit the older generation against the "cinema-going," "radio-tuned" youth, nor does he oversimplify Data's freedom as an irreversible break from her mother-in-law's traditionalism. As a member of the new generation of Indo-Guyanese women, then, Data's struggle for her independence is not reduced to a simplistic confrontation between tradition and modernity, or by extension, to a choice between a "Hindu/East Indian" and Creole identity. Such simplistic binaries are shown to capitulate into empty cultural codes, as is evidenced in her peers' donning of the outward signs of change without a concomitant awareness of the imbalances of power inherent within and without the community.

In fact, Data is shown to dissociate herself from the majority of her female peers who lend credence to the older generation's fear that modernity is synonymous with materialism, consumerism and an empty pop culture at the expense of a deeply rooted spiritual and cultural heritage. Data thus rejects both a blind adherence to tradition as well as other forms of social conformity, and locates individual and cultural autonomy in the critical revaluation of cultural and social codes which undermine the process of self-determination in a progressively less certain socioeconomic climate:

It had become clearer to her that she wanted to be more than Chan, though she admired Chan's bold and independent spirit. No. Chan was just an ordinary housewife. She depending on she husband. In one way Chan still tie-down [. . .]. Not me. Oh no! Data wanted to be herself [. . .] where she could do her own thinking, aspire to live her own dreams, start building a future for her unborn children [. . .]. Yes! become herself. Her own person. (133-4)

Data rests on the critical precipice between her elder's nostalgic reveries and her peers' seemingly misguided attempts at challenging the status quo. In this sense, Data wishes to expand the possibilities of what "a good Hindu girl" might imply in a broader social context.

As a fourth generation descendant of indentured labourers, Shewcharan shares Monar's background. As the first Indo-Guyanese female novelist, Shewcharan also boasts a status in the canon of Guyanese literature that is similar to the one held by Lakshmi Persaud in the canon of Trinidadian literature.<sup>21</sup> Though she now resides in England, Shewcharan is one of the only writers (to date) of a new generation of Guyanese novelists to have told her story while living in her native Guyana.

Her political account of post-independence Guyana from the multiple perspectives of a wide cross-section of urban society betrays Shewcharan's journalistic background. Indeed, her first novel, *Tomorrow is Another Day*, recalls such seminal works as Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* in its consideration of the usurpation of national unity by neocolonial forms of economic and political hegemony. However, Shewcharan's novel is historically specific in its portrayal of the political activism of Guyana's South Asian diasporic community and their subsequent disenfranchisement in a post-independence state. In this respect, Shewcharan's novel has more in common with Peter Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle* than Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. Though each of the above comparisons

merits further attention, Shewcharan can be said to pave new ground in situating her novel against the political backdrop of 1980s Guyana, the country's most tumultuous period since its inception in 1970 as a "Co-operative Socialist Republic" under PNC (People's National Congress) leader Forbes Burnham.

Whereas Monar's *Janjhat* seems to caution against the encroachment of a progressively materialist and consumer-driven society, Shewcharan's novel confirms the political and social morass into which post-independence Guyana has plunged. Though her Indo-Guyanese characters bring to the fore a South Asian diasporic identity, they do so only in terms of its external markers, such as Hindu names and religious mores. Nevertheless, the author grounds her political commentary in city-dwelling characters whose Indo-Guyanese perspective clearly establishes a critical basis of contrast between an older generation who are still connected to the communally-oriented values of plantation life and a younger generation of individualistic urbanites.

In Shewcharan's novel, the post-independence context has ironically brought about a total collapse in gender communication rather than bridged the gap between men and women in a newly emancipated society. In the same breath, increasing economic hardship, political elitism and a racialist ideology have led to both familial and social dysfunction. The elements of social fragmentation and cultural assimilation that are beginning to touch the rural community are thus shown to have besieged urban society. Indeed, Shewcharan's urban portrait is constructed as a fragmented assortment of competing private interests, such that the notion of "community" becomes a necessary ingredient in the reconstruction of Guyanese society as a whole.

From the outset, Shewcharan's narrative is a thinly veiled fictionalization of the historic racial divide to have occurred in the formation of Guyana's two official parties. Shewcharan's narrative thus commences with the last attempt of an Indo-Guyanese politician, Jagru, a leading member of the opposition, to join forces with the "Official Party." Jagru's last attempt at political activism is depicted as a naive appeal to a government that sees in the "East Indian" figurehead an opportunity to racially diversify its electorate while keeping a racial scapegoat close at hand.

Jagru immediately recalls Peter Nazareth's protagonist Joseph D-Souza, the gradually disillusioned right-hand man of the ascendant President of a newly independent African state. Indeed, the thematic echo is doubly reinforced in Shewcharan's portrait of an ailing political regime that has not only betrayed its socialist ideals and ravaged its economy in gross IMF debt and a fraudulent presidency, but also capitulated into a racially divisive nationalist discourse.

In addition, Shewcharan provides a brief caricature of Forbes Burnham in the shadowy figure of the out-going Prime Minister Rouche. Rouche stands at the epicentre of a fractured and dispirited national consciousness whose "Official Party's" platform is addressed to a primarily middle class, urban, black and creole electorate:

Rouche had won the support of his *own* people, as he liked to call them. His appeals had been directed at them in exclusive denial of the many other races which inhabited the island, including those whose forebears had come as indentured immigrants [ . . . ]; Who could claim that his regime did not represent all the races when men like Jagru were on his platform, [ . . . ]. (*TIAD* 50; 51)

But Shewcharan is quick to point out that the "East Indian" is not the only casualty of Rouche's fraudulent government and its bankrupt economy. Indeed, Shewcharan

captures the dire economic climate of 1980s Guyana as it affected all members of Guyanese society. The novel thus shares a thematic echo with her short story “Janjhat,” in her documentary depiction of the daily inequities of the Burnham dictatorship, its defunct bureaucratic structure, its rampant black market trade, and its widespread shortages of goods which culminated in seemingly endless “queues for basic food items that were a familiar feature of city life after 1981” (Guyana Human Rights Association 84).

Indeed, Shewcharan’s description of the various means by which the ordinary citizen strives to eke out a living in the face of impoverishment is as much an indictment of a morally bankrupt government as it is a testament to human ingenuity and spiritual resilience. To this end, the “food line” becomes a leit motif which underscores the literal act of “waiting” for a rationed handout and the figurative act of waiting for a better “tomorrow.” The only way that the ordinary citizen can benefit from the seemingly dehumanizing process of the food line is in his/her ability to turn it into a source of potential revenue. Thus, Aunt Adee suggests to a desperate Chandi to have her children stand in the food lines, for a nominal fee, on behalf of the elderly.

Since all members of society invariably end up at the food line, it also becomes the central metaphor for the coming-together of otherwise socially and racially stratified people. The stark juxtaposition of Chandi’s impoverishment with Jagru’s family’s relative affluence is thus brought to light in this context:

She had met them in town today: Radika and her mother-in-law, Kunti. She had helped them out by queuing for them in the food line. She had told them her story [. . .]. She hungered for listeners and for their easy words of sympathy, but she stilled the impulse to go and knock at their door. She could not afford the luxury. (*TIAD* 17)

Echoing Monar's multi-generational portrait, Shewcharan exposes the misrepresentation of subaltern women "as harmonious symbols of historical continuity [. . .]" (Rajan 135). Shewcharan's narrative necessarily offers more varied articulations of female subjectivity than does Monar, given the greater range of class stratifications, economic opportunities and vocations available for the city-dwelling citizen. In this sense, Chandi, Asha and Radika are representative figures of a younger generation of Indo-Guyanese women whose cultural outlooks are shown to be filtered through each character's contrasting socioeconomic circumstances.

For Chandi, who has followed the traditional pattern of an early marriage and motherhood, the principal site of struggle is economic rather than cultural. In other words, in her impoverished state, she is saddled with the seemingly impossible task of ensuring her family's survival. In contrast, as a single woman without the burdens of familial responsibility, Asha's less conventional involvement in her brothers' smuggling ring is less a symbol of her "emancipation" as a symptom of her country's stunted economic and social growth. Finally, as a member of the country's elite, Jagru's dysfunctional wife, Radika, is desperate to free herself from an empty bourgeois, domestic lifestyle, though she continues to remain immune, if not callously indifferent, to the sociopolitical and economic plight of her less fortunate female peers. Each woman's confinement within limiting social or economic circumstances thereby renders cultural survival secondary to her more immediately felt economic needs or emotional vacuum.

In the variously positioned identities of her diasporic characters, Shewcharan also establishes a basis of comparison between the male and female Indo-Guyanese response to post-coloniality. Like Monar, Shewcharan reveals that the breakdown in

gender communication in the urban context reveals the subtle interplay between social disintegration and the complicity of patriarchal structures. In other words, the distance between men and women is shown to inevitably constrain both parties within fixed socioeconomic codes. Indeed, Shewcharan reveals that political activism and agency are themselves at the mercy of patriarchal structures which harness both men and women within predictable social expectations and behavioural patterns.

Thus, on the one hand, Asha begins to share Jagru's political convictions: "She'd managed to keep apart, to remain as a distant observer, looking on at this panorama of bad times. But Jagru's energy made her wonder if she shouldn't abandon that role, become more active. Perhaps change was possible, if people joined together in hope and determination" (179). On the other hand, Jagru's political convictions are compromised by his treatment of Asha as a sexual object: "Jagru at last became aware that she was struggling, trying to get him off her. He sat up in concern. Had he hurt her?" (185). It is important to note, however, that Asha is hardly characterized as the victim of Jagru's sexual advances; rather, she is shown to prevaricate between her temptation to accept Jagru's offer "to take care of her" in the kind of luxury reserved for the political elite and her desire to follow through on Jagru's call to political action.

As a counter-narrative to Asha and Jagru's prevarications, then, figures such as Chandi, Aunt Adee, Kunti and Ban are shown to be the most effective "activists." insofar as they have succeeded in striking a delicate balance between private morality and public action. For instance, Chandi literally sacrifices herself for the insurance of her children's future; Aunt Adee and Kunti use the limited channels available to them to come to the aid of those around them; and Ban's selfless dedication to her cause



still finds room for personal acts of compassion, as her involvement in Jagru's release from prison attests. In this sense, Ban's political activism stands in contrast to that of Chandi's husband, Lal, whose inability to reconcile his political principles with his familial responsibilities culminates in his symbolic violation of his wife.

In the recurring motif of possible new beginnings, Shewcharan's narrative celebrates the strength of the human spirit not as it is embodied in individuals but as it is fuelled by the individual's sense of a shared humanity. To this end, the Indo-Guyanese community's deeply rooted tradition of familial piety, communal solidarity and cultural resilience serves as a potential basis of inspiration in a cynically individualistic world. This is not to suggest that Shewcharan idealizes a community that is as victimized by as it is complicit in the business of exploitation. Rather, Shewcharan repeatedly affirms that the reconciliation between private and public action is best achieved in the dissolution of rigid gender-based roles and a coterminous deconstruction of cultural and racial polarization. In this sense, familial and social disintegration become cross-cultural concerns that touch all members of Guyanese society.

Given the polarized racial and cultural climate of post-independence Guyana, Shewcharan singles out the older generation as a symbol of cross-cultural unity in their shared history of oppression. In this sense, it is the collective action taken by Jagru's mother, Kunti, and her Afro-Guyanese friend, Aunt Adee, that saves Chandi and her family from starvation and social collapse. In this interracial act of compassion, Shewcharan can be shown to include wider Guyanese society in the paradigm of the moral basis of community: "He'd grown to appreciate the warmth which lay under Aunt Adee's appearance. It was people like her who gave the lie to

stories of racial unrest, which were always being promoted by unscrupulous politicians looking after their own interest" (202).

As a representative of an older generation of women, Kunti echoes Big Bye mooma's despair over the disintegration of core cultural values, and shares the latter's memories of communal kinship in the experience of "backdam wuk." However, Kunti's identification with women of other racial/ethnic groups enables her to envision communal values in less exclusivist and self-protective terms. In other words, Kunti's exposure to the multi-racial texture of urban life extends her conception of communality to include "others" like Aunt Adee. Ironically, then, while elders such as Big Bye mooma are shown to hinder the younger generation's integration within wider Caribbean society, the older generation of Shewcharan's community acts as the collective conscience of a newly "independent" society that has spiralled into social collapse: "What kind of generation was it that knew nothing of right and wrong" (183).

The most significant point of contrast between Monar and Shewcharan's feminist portraits thus lies in the differences found in their respective rural and urban settings, a difference which offers a relatively new basis of comparison in terms of the Indo-Guyanese novel. Not only does this point of contrast provide a cross-sectional portrait of Indo-Guyanese society, but it also helps us gauge the role that contemporary Indo-Guyanese fiction might play in the shaping of a post-independence Guyanese consciousness. In other words, the proliferation of perspectives to which the Guyanese novel is giving rise affords a preliminary impression of the differences and tensions with which an emerging national consciousness must contend. Though these authors do not profess to shape a national

consciousness--a claim often assumed by an earlier generation of Caribbean authors, such as George Lamming, whose writing bridged the colonial and post-colonial era--they nonetheless attempt to reassess the relationship between the individual and the imagined community since their country's independence.

Though inescapably conscious of their recent colonial past, these texts turn an inward critical gaze to the issues of racial and cultural rivalry, gender and generational differences, the struggle for survival, etc., underlying their country's collective plight. In other words, the focus of resistance is not the colonial master narrative but the complex internal fabric of Guyanese society. Jameson's paradigm of the "national allegory" might come to mind here, but what these texts foreground is, as Aijaz Ahmed more accurately suggests, "the process of allegorisation not in nationalistic terms but simply as a relation between private and public, personal and communal" ("Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness" 15).<sup>22</sup>

In both novels, diasporic experience affects the question of "independence" at both the individual and collective level. On the one hand, diasporic experience is shown to produce a reactionary and essentialist politics of identity which resists change in the interest of self-preservation. The rural diasporic community's instinct for cultural survival at the expense of wider Guyanese society thus mirrors the individual's instinct for self-preservation at all costs, including the welfare of others--a reaction that is reinforced in an urban landscape overrun by the effects of social dysfunction, political cynicism, economic hardship and human detachment. Conversely, diasporic experience acts as a symbol of cross-cultural commonality/communality, at least in the Guyanese citizens' shared histories of

colonial oppression and their subsequent suffering at the hands of a new political elite.

Monar and Shewcharan's novels thus envision the quest for "independence" as a conscientious negotiation between private, communal and national interests which conceptualizes change in more "inclusive" and less starkly oppositional terms. Indeed, both novels end in the affirmation that individual, cultural and national identities, like the process of change itself, are not formed along fixed linear and oppositional trajectories but as multiple (hybrid) positionings "within the narratives of the past" (Hall 394) in the coterminous (and common) struggle for a better tomorrow:

As he followed a narrow street to the Public Road, his eyes were struck by a tall coconut tree in one of the neighbouring yards. It bent and swayed in the stiff Atlantic breeze, but each year grew surely, tall and defiant, towards the sun. (*Janjhat* 141)

For them tomorrow was always there, always the next day. They had to make one day join another. They couldn't just forget the tomorrow that stretched inevitably before them, however uninviting it was, to fight for a different and distant tomorrow which might never come. (*TIAD* 237)

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> A common occurrence among contracted labourers was the debt they incurred for their passage overseas, which resulted in their inability to afford the return journey home. Indentured immigrants were also often denied the promised return passage home by the time they completed their term of contract. See Hugh Tinker, Marina Carter and David Northrup for discussions of the exploitative conditions of indenture.

<sup>2</sup> These statistics have been cross-referenced between Mohammed A. Rauf's *Indian Village in Guyana* and Colin Carke et al's *South Asians Overseas: migration and ethnicity*.

<sup>3</sup> Guyana is home to many different indigenous groups. The Caribs and Arawaks are the best known among these indigenous groups as natives of the Caribbean islands (the Caribs, of course, reminding us of why the archipelago was so-named). (See Vere T. Daly's *A Short History of Guyana*.)

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Cyril Dabydeen's short story "Amerindians" in *Theatre of the Arts: Wilson Harris and the Caribbean*. Editors Hena Maes-Jelink and Benedicte Ledent. New York: Rodopi, 2002: 25-35.

<sup>5</sup> See Rauf's *Indian Village in Guyana*. The "six peoples" is a loose racial delineation, which does not include "creole" as an official designation and yet distinguishes between "Portuguese" and "European."

<sup>6</sup> All references to Monar's *Janjhat* are from the 1989 Peepal Tree Press edition.

<sup>7</sup> This quote comes from my personal correspondences with Cyril Dabydeen. With the author's permission, this quote has been taken from an email dated May 10, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 3 on East and South Africa for a definition and contextualized discussion of the "middle man" stereotype.

<sup>9</sup> The majority of indentured peoples in the Caribbean region came from Eastern Bihar where the main language was Bhojpuri (a Hindi dialect). In the mixed linguistic context of South Asian diasporic peoples, Indo-Caribbeans cannot only be said to speak Creole, a "West Indian dialect" (see Kenneth Ramchand's *The West Indian Novel and its Background*), but a form of Creole that incorporates South Asian languages, particularly Hindi, Urdu and Bhojpuri. See Brian L Moore's comments

about the “creolization” of Bhojpuri with Afro-Guyanese Creole, in *Cultural Power, Resistance, and Pluralism: Colonial Guyana 1838-1900*.

<sup>10</sup> Forbes Burnham came to power in a coalition government in 1964. Ideologically, Burnham distanced himself from (Indo-Guyanese) Dr. Cheddi Jagan’s PPP (People’s Progressive Party), the first party to win general elections in 1953 under universal adult suffrage. Burnham was Chairman of PPP until 1955 when he split to form his own party, the PNC (People’s National Congress). Burnham’s defection is said to have created the racial split in contemporary Guyanese politics since he primarily relied on the urban Afro-Guyanese population for political support. Burnham is also accused of a fraudulent government both for his widely disputed electoral victories as well as for a socialist ideology that was thwarted by a CIA-backed government. For a more detailed look at Burnham’s reign until the recent reelection of PPP (the first time since Guyana’s independence from Britain in 1966), see the Guyana Human Rights Association’s *Guyana: Fraudulent Revolution*. For an overview of Guyanese history, see Vere T. Daly’s *A Short History of the Guyanese People*.

<sup>11</sup> Trinidadian Lakshmi Persaud’s *Butterfly in the Wind*, Antiguan Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*, Cuban-American Christina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* are just a few Caribbean women writers whose first novels take the form of fictional autobiography.

<sup>12</sup> John A. Skinner’s categorization of the trends in Anglophone Caribbean Literature consist of the post-colonial dystopia, such as Shiva Naipaul’s *A Hot Country* (1983), the fictional autobiography, such as George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*, experimental novels such as Wilson Harris’s *Guyana Quartet* and, finally, “other voices” under which all Indo-Caribbean writing would fall in its articulation of a “new” ethno-Caribbean literary voice.

<sup>13</sup> See M.K. Bacchus’s “The Education of East Indians in Guyana” and Verene A. Shepherd’s “Official Policy Toward Education of Children of Indian Immigrants and Settlers in Jamaica, 1879-1950.”

<sup>14</sup> All subsequent references to Shewcharan’s *Tomorrow is Another Day* are from the Peepal Tree Press 1994 edition and will be abbreviated as “*TLAD*”

<sup>15</sup> See Moses Seenarine’s study of the relationship between caste and endogamy in “The Persistence of Caste and Anti-Caste Resistance in India and the diaspora.” See

also Mohammed A. Rauf's *Indian Village in Guyana*, for his look at the centrality of marriage in Indo-Guyanese society wherein the greater part of religious ritual is observed and maintained in the marriage ceremony.

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Monar is one of Guyana's leading literary voices. He is best known as a short story writer. *Backdam People* and *High House and Radio* are his two most important short story collections. There is very little biographical information on either Monar or Shewcharan. Any biographical information noted here has been cross-referenced between Jeremy Poynting's "Anglophone Caribbean literature: towards the millennium"; personal correspondence with Poynting via email; Benjamin et al's *They Came in Ships: an Anthology of Indo-Guyanese Prose and Poetry*; and Birbalsingh's Introduction to *Jahaji: An Anthology of Indo-Caribbean Fiction* as well as his collection of essays and reviews, *From Pillar to Post*.

<sup>17</sup> The "assimilationist versus traditionalist" debate is echoed across the South Asian diasporic context, from South Africa (see Chapter 3) to the Caribbean, but it is a binary that needs to be better nuanced. At any rate, it certainly should not be generalized to the point that it is seen as the only response to diasporic identity.

<sup>18</sup> See Partha Chatterjee's seminal work, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*.

<sup>19</sup> Guyana's two major parties are the PNC and PPP. The PNC was founded by Indo-Guyanese Dr. Cheddi Jagan, and the PNC by the former PPP Chairman, Forbes Burnham.

<sup>20</sup> See Moses Seenarines's "Indentured Women in Colonial Guyana: Recruitment, Migration, Labor and Caste."

<sup>21</sup> It can also be said that Janice Shinebourne, a Guyanese writer of South Asian and Chinese origins, whose works *Timepiece* and *The Last English Plantation*, predate Shewcharan's first novel by several years, merits this position.

<sup>22</sup> See Fredric Jameson's contention that "third world texts" are national allegories in "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital" and Aijaz Ahmed's repudiation of this argument, on the basis that it is homogenizing and Eurocentric. in "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'."

## **Chapter 5 - Trinidad**



**Signs of 'Faith' in the Diasporic Ties That Bind:  
The Relative Fictions of 'Community' and 'Commonality'  
in Lakshmi Persaud's *Butterfly in the Wind* and Sharlow Mohammed's *The Elect***

Trinidad is home to the largest South Asian diasporic community in the Caribbean archipelago. Indentured peoples began to disembark on its shores by 1845, several years after Guyana had established itself (as early as 1838) as the first plantation colony in the Americas to receive South Asian immigrants. Historically, the South Asian population of Trinidad and Tobago has shared a near-majority status with people of African origins: since a 1987 census, ethnic ratios have remained relatively stable at forty-two percent "black," forty percent "East Indian," sixteen percent "other/mixed" and two percent "white."<sup>1</sup>

Even as one of the largest and oldest ethnic collectives in the Caribbean region, however, there is a certain veil of mystique surrounding Indo-Caribbean peoples, one that is poignantly captured in the Afro-Caribbean writer's perspective: for example, St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott admits to a tourist-like fascination with the Indo-Triniadian peoples' "delight of conviction [. . .] on the edge of the Caroni Plain" ("The Antilles" 294); similarly, Barbadian novelist George Lamming confesses that he, like most Afro-Caribbean peoples, "lived in an involuntary, almost unconscious segregation from the world of Indians" ("The Indian Presence" 47) in spite of the fact that the "Indian presence is no less Caribbean in its formation than that of their African comrades" (54).

In his recent study of Caribbean Literature,<sup>2</sup> Michael Dash draws on Edouard Glissant's theorization of Caribbean peoples as a creolized collective. Because of their trans-cultural aesthetic, Dash argues that Caribbean Literatures are best approached in regional terms over and above their particular articulations of nationhood or ethnicity. In fact, Dash's view corresponds with the fluid metaphor of the sea (found in numerous examples of Afro-Caribbean writing)<sup>3</sup> as the quintessential symbol of the Caribbean as a "unified whole" (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 233). In this light, the Caribbean is viewed as an inter-textual cultural canvas that "generates a materialist archipelagraphy [which] seeks to undermine colonial discourses of island isolation and to fashion broader, anti-colonial alliances" (Deloughery, "'The Litany of Islands'" 46).<sup>4</sup>

Focusing almost exclusively on Afro-Caribbean history and literatures, however, Dash overlooks a fundamental distinction between the "kinds" of diasporic peoples that make up this Caribbean collective: that is to say, Glissant's own differentiation between the "transplanted" diaspora (e.g., indentured labourers), and the "transferred" diaspora (e.g., African slaves). As Glissant states:

I feel that what makes this difference between a people that survives elsewhere, *that maintains its original nature*, and a population that is transformed elsewhere *into another people* (without, however, succumbing to the reductive pressures of the Other) and that thus enters the constantly shifting and variable processes of creolization (of relationship, of relativity), is that the latter has not brought with it, not collectively continued, the methods of existence and survival, both material and spiritual, which it practiced before being uprooted. (*Caribbean Discourse* 15)

Glissant's conception of Caribbean identity as a rhizomatic and relational collective of creolized subjects neither denies the Indo-Caribbean the possibility of a hybrid identity nor the Afro-Caribbean the possibility of cultural continuity. Rather,

Glissant's typology points to the important historical distinction between the respective narratives of slavery and indenture, a distinction that must be taken into consideration in any study seeking to "theorize" and "historicize" the Caribbean (Dash, *The Other America* 17).

Indeed, indenture closely corresponds to Glissant's model of peoples whose largely voluntary *en masse* migration facilitated the physical "transplantation" of the tools (e.g., foods, clothing and artefacts) and knowledge systems (e.g., sacred religious texts) which helped ensure cultural survival. Glissant's distinction is made evident in the common image of Indo-Caribbean enclaves—Vijay Mishra's "little Indias"<sup>5</sup>--which partly reveal the structure of plantation society as a racially divided system of labour and partly disclose the nature of the "transplanted" South Asian diasporic community itself.

In the former case, suffice it to say that once indentured peoples became the primary labour force on the plantation, they remained a relatively segregated community under the auspices of the colonial system, first by means of the Pass System (established in Mauritius)<sup>6</sup> and later by means of colonial institutions such as missionary schools.<sup>7</sup> Also, many indentured peoples forfeited a return passage home for the opportunity to purchase crown land in the island interiors which, in turn, resulted in their isolation well into the earlier part of the twentieth century. Together, these factors have helped preserve the religious and social structures of South Asian peoples in the Caribbean context. However, as has been seen in Deepchand Beeharry's *That Others Might Live*, the sense of "commonality" among South Asian diasporic peoples came about as early as the arduous sea voyage from the Indian

Subcontinent to the colonies, and is thereby predicated on their historical and spiritual bond as “jahaji bhai” (ship brothers)<sup>8</sup> or indentured peoples.

Though a widely applicable hermeuntics, therefore, Dash’s regionalization of Caribbean identity precludes a specialized view of the particular developments, features and concerns of Indo-Caribbean writing. Though Indo-Trinidadian writing necessarily constitutes an integral part of the cross-cultural Caribbean imagination, it is important to first understand the particularities of Indo-Caribbean experience as one which is not only positioned within the narrative of the Middle Passage and the subsequent emergence of a new creole identity, but also positions itself along a different (though necessarily transecting) trajectory: namely, indentured labour and South Asian diasporic history. In other words, Dash’s theorization of Caribbean Literature within the larger postmodern paradigms of hybridization discounts the historical conditions and cultural characteristics of indentured peoples whose transplanted traditions, religious rites, languages and customs attest to the distinctive Indo-Caribbean identity which constitutes the underlying structure of the Indo-Caribbean novel.

For instance, one of the most striking differences between Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean Literatures is the depiction of community not as a syncretic and transcultural entity (Dash 5), but rather as a fraternity of ethnic, cultural and historical ties whose principal impulse is its resistance to the accelerated processes of identitarian fragmentation and flux brought about by cultural displacement. Indeed, the central metaphor of the sea is absent in novels that are so often set in the island interior’s sugar belt, the traditional setting of the indentured labourer’s plantation estate dwellings. This is poetically underscored in the opening paragraph of Sharlow

Mohammed's *The Elect* (1992),<sup>9</sup> where the protagonist feels unable to challenge the grand narratives of European imperial history given his own decidedly limited perspective within a seemingly land-locked horizon:

Tom didn't know if he believed teacher MacDonald when he told the class the earth was round. He told them how they could prove it by standing on a beach and watching the ships come in; they would see the mast first, long before the hull; this showed the earth was like a ball. Trouble was Tom had never been to the sea, never seen a real ship, and as for knowing what a hull was [. . .]. (9)

Where Indo-Caribbean Literature has been compared to the greater body of Caribbean literature, it has primarily been discussed in terms of the common tropes of "rootlessness" and "homelessness" established in V.S. Naipaul's Trinidad-based novels, such as *A House for Mr. Biswas* or *The Mimic Men* (Birbalsingh, Introduction x). To this end, Victor Ramraj concludes that Naipaul's metaphor of the "enigma of arrival," wherein exile or the feeling of never being "at home" (be it in the Caribbean island of birth, the Indian motherland or the seat of Empire), is the prevailing Indo-Caribbean condition.<sup>10</sup> This reading of the diaspora is poetically underlined in the adoption of the *Ramayana*, a Hindu epic whose central themes are that of exile, suffering, struggle and eventual return, as the definitive text of a predominantly Hindu community.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, Naipaul's recurring thematic of eventual departure or escape can be seen as the culmination of a diasporic consciousness that is common to Caribbean Literature as a whole. As Helen Tiffin asserts, Indo-Trinidadian writing shares with black Caribbean writing "qualities of exile and dislocation" ("Indo-Fijian and Indo-Trinidadian Writing" 96). However, as Frank Birbalsingh more accurately points out, it is important to contextualize Naipaul's paradigmatic sense of "homelessness" as the

result of the “doubly marginalized” condition of the Indo-Caribbean: that is, the legacy of a colonial condition that situates Caribbean peoples “on the fringes of the European-American metropolis” and the status of Indo-Caribbean peoples as cultural outsiders “within this already dependent and devalued creole culture” (*From Pillar to Post* xv).

Naipaul’s metaphor of rootlessness bears particular resonance among an earlier generation of writers whose works emerged during the transition from a colonial to a post-colonial era, a period that put into question the individual and collective fate of South Asian diasporic peoples in their respective countries of settlement. As both the Caribbean and East Africa contexts reveal, therefore, the era of decolonization witnessed the subsequent migration of South Asian diasporic peoples to the western metropolises. Indeed, Naipaul’s metaphor of the diasporic subject’s prevailing desire to “escape to an autumn pavement” (quoted in Tiffin 90) is sadly confirmed in the fact that Sharlow Mohammed is one of the only writers of Naipaul’s generation to have stayed behind in his native Trinidad.

However, Naipaul’s paradigmatic “enigma of arrival” as the underlying South Asian diasporic condition has been considerably nuanced if not overturned by writers such as Mohammed and Persaud whose novels have emerged well after the decolonization of the British Caribbean. In novels which focus almost exclusively on Indo-Trinidadian peoples, Mohammed and Persaud portray the diasporic community as a long-established, multi-generational institution which is now as surely embedded in the Caribbean landscape as it is spiritually sustained by South Asian culture. In fact, the naturalistic flavour of each of these novels is made tangible in detailed

descriptions of the daily patterns of communal life as the centripetal, unifying feature of Indo-Trinidadian experience.

Indeed, if the paradigm of exile found in Caribbean Literature appears in these novels, it does not function as an overriding symbol of rootlessness, at least not within the protective enclave of community in which the majority of its members are shown to be quite "at home." Indeed, for those writers who are now several generations removed from the moment of their ancestor's enigmatic arrival in the Caribbean, the common tropes of cultural alienation and "familiar temporariness" (Naipaul, quoted in "(B)ordering Naipaul" 220) are considerably tempered. This is because these writers seem less preoccupied with the psychic legacy of displacement than with the external and internal factors which threaten to undermine the integrity of the diasporic community, on the one hand, and continue to compromise inter-ethnic relations, on the other.

As Birbalsingh affirms, in his anthology of a multi-generational cast of Indo-Caribbean writers, Naipaul's answer to the question of belonging (i.e., that rootlessness is not simply a diasporic but a universal human condition) seems unsatisfactory to a younger generation of Indo-Caribbean writers. Indeed, the question itself can be said to have been reformulated in texts which not only depict an almost bicentennial community but also the indigenization of its culture in the Caribbean landscape. In fact, the neurosis of displacement and colonial mimicry that pervaded Naipaul's reading of the Caribbean--a reading which incited a great deal of criticism<sup>12</sup>--has been at least partially allayed in more recently published Indo-Caribbean fiction.

For instance, in Lakshmi Persaud's first novel *Butterfly in the Wind* (1990),<sup>13</sup> the various autobiographical details of her protagonist's life create the distinctly "South Asian" flavour found in other Indo-Caribbean novels, such as Sharlow Mohammed's *The Elect*, Cyril Dabydeen's *The Wizard Swami* and V.S. Naipaul's own fiction, beginning with his first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*. These details include her family's Hindu-Brahmin background; the centrality of the *Ramayana* in daily prayers and religious ceremonies; the quotidian use of religious lingo (e.g., *kathas*, *pujas* and *siwala*), traditional foods (e.g., *roti*, *gulabjamans* and *chatni*) and cultural objects (e.g., *lota*, *chulha* and *orhni*); and the prevalence of Urdu/Hindi terms and modes of address (e.g., *didi* and *pundit*).

In her intimate familiarity with the above cultural markers, Persaud's protagonist, Kamla Maharaj, greatly resembles Naipaul's Indo-Trinidadian protagonists; i.e., she is a descendant of indentured labourers whose life is circumscribed by the tightly-woven cultural and spiritual fabric of her diasporic community. However, the female novelist rarely betrays the feeling that her transplanted community is a mere replica of the originary homeland, or, as Naipaul recently put it, "a kind of India [. . .] which we could, as it were, unroll like a carpet on the flat land" ("Nobel Address" 7). On the contrary, Persaud's detailed descriptions of home, family, community and culture animate, in the context of the everyday, what Walcott refers to in his observation of an Indo-Trinidadian performance of the *Ramleela*,<sup>14</sup> thousands of miles and several generations removed from the motherland: that is, not "loss" but a "delight of conviction."

Be it in the anxiety of exile or the delight of conviction, Indo-Caribbean writers not only give voice to the specificities of South Asian diasporic experience,



but also make evident the process of indigenization of South Asian culture in the diasporic location. Persaud's description of her community in the semantics of a foundational history, rather than as an elusive sign of displacement, clearly speaks of her "delight of conviction." Indeed, the community is itself a formative text in her protagonist Kamla's development, such that her seemingly innocent childhood observations are windows to an ancient wisdom and their current application as living systems of knowledge found in such acts as her grandmother's mustard oil massages, her mother's elaborate *pujas*, and Kamla's generally infectious participation in the "simple joys" of life, such as buying her favourite South Asian sweet meats from the local market or picking just the right kind of flowers for temple offerings.

In fact, "the poetics of landscape" as a component of Caribbean Literature, whereby the land is a character that is "central to the process of self-possession" (Dash, Introduction xxxv), assumes a double resonance in Persaud's *Butterfly in the Wind*. Here, nature is not only invested with the character and history of the island tropics but also with the rich sensory details and vocabulary of South Asian culture. In other words, in her loving catalogue of the foods, names, rituals and flora and fauna that have been introduced to and indigenized in the Caribbean by indentured peoples and their descendants, Persaud illustrates how the "old Indian diasporas [. . .] transformed the physical and cultural landscapes to such an extent that these landscapes are now meaningless without reference to them" (Mishra, "The Diasporic Imaginary" 430).

Although Persaud has lived in Britain for the latter half of her life, her ties to family, her frequent returns to her native Trinidad and her former teaching career in Trinidad and Jamaica are apparent in an œuvre that is imaginatively situated

exclusively in the Caribbean. Persaud is also the first Indo-Trinidadian female writer to have authored a “full-length work” (Ramchand, “‘Coming Out of Repression’” 225). Persaud has written three novels to date, two of which are set entirely in the village of Pasea, in the Tunapuna district where the author spent her childhood.<sup>15</sup> Her first novel, *Butterfly in the Wind*, is a fictional autobiography that is strung together as a series of interwoven sketches which describe, from the first-person perspective, a young girl’s development within a close-knit, predominantly Hindu community.

Persaud offers an unprecedented portrait of 1940s Trinidad as it is filtered through the consciousness of a Hindu girl who is nurtured and protected by her relatively well-to-do entrepreneurial family. Persaud’s novel thus offers a unique female perspective of the more often than not antagonistic interplay between her orthodox Hindu upbringing and a European colonial education. Since Persaud did not begin to write until her 50s,<sup>16</sup> however, her retrospective is often impeded by a degree of narrative dissonance wherever the author seems to struggle to bring together a fragmented memoir of events. Subsequently, Persaud’s novel often strikes an uneasy balance between genres, while devoid of the post-modern strategies of irony and metafiction which narrativize the fallibility of memory or the distorting effects of nostalgia.

As one of the few Trinidadian novelists of South Asian origins to have remained in his country of birth, Sharlow Mohammed’s *The Elect* is one of the few recently published novels to focus on the Caribbean’s “contemporary social experience” (Poynting, “Anglophone Caribbean Literature” 71). Persaud’s somewhat idyllic view, at least of her own familial and cultural milieu, is therefore problematized in Sharlow Mohammed’s satirical indictment of the far less

“wholesome” diasporic community of Palmist, at least as it has come to be overrun by external *and* internal forms of corruption. Though Mohammed seems more critical than Persaud of the inherent tensions within the diasporic community itself, he nonetheless confirms Persaud’s view that the underpinning structure of the community is its collective ethos or sense of fraternity, particularly when “constituted negatively” (Clifford, *Routes* 250) against discriminatory or alienating practices.

Mohammed’s examination of the extent to which religious conversion destabilizes the diasporic subject’s self-perception is reminiscent of Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*—a novel which indicts the Canadian Presbyterian Mission’s deracinating policy of making education accessible to the indentured labourer’s children on the condition of their Christianization. Mohammed’s protagonist, Tom, is one such casualty of religious indoctrination and its complicity in colonial policy. Indeed, like Mootoo’s haunting figure of Ramchandin, Tom is stigmatized as a cultural outsider whose own parents’ Hindu practices and beliefs appear foreign and incomprehensible.<sup>17</sup> But, unlike Mootoo’s unequivocal attack on the Canadian Presbyterian mission’s racist practices, Tom’s Presbyterian background is used as an ironic point of contrast to the economically exploitative agenda of the American Fundamentalist missions, which were to emerge in full and unrelenting force by the 1970s and 1980s—the era in which *The Elect* is primarily set. These competing religious missions thus underscore the author’s critical commentary on the imperceptible transition from a colonial to a neo-colonial era, and the altogether bitter irony that religion/religious doctrine can rent asunder the diasporic community as readily as it has held it together.

In his reading of one of Mohammed's short stories, "Bruit," Birbalsingh perceptively notes that the author "fuses Naipaulian techniques such as caricature, farce, irony and repartee, with comic resources of Trinidad creole speech to produce a keen satirical edge" (Introduction xxix). Birbalsingh's comparison of Naipaul's first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, to Mohammed's short fiction can be applied to *The Elect* where religious charlatanism (embodied in the satirical figure of Pastor Goberdan) is the driving force of setting, character and plot. Mohammed's satire carries with it an additional element of bawdy humour that only sharpens the author's unsparing attack on absolutist doctrines. Ironically, then, it is Tom, the local apostate, who witnesses the "spiritual holocaust" (*TE* 131) of the Indo-Trinidadian community at the hands of another converted Hindu: "[. . .] they were surprised to see a huge American limousine parked outside Mr. Singh's gate and to hear coming from the gallery loud American-sounding voices. When they looked up, though, one of the two smartly dressed middle-aged men was a burly Indian, [. . .]" (25).

Sharlow Mohammed's *The Elect* thus offers an interesting basis for comparison to Persaud's "Tunapuna" community on several levels: a) whereas Persaud celebrates the strength of religious belief and custom as the cornerstone of "community," Mohammed examines the effects of religious conversion on a majority Hindu community that has been twice colonized by the earlier Canadian Presbyterian mission and the more recent spat of American-imported Evangelical missions; b) whereas Persaud configures the family as the symbolic nucleus of the community's social and cultural cohesion, Mohammed reveals that this is an extremely tenuous inter-relationship insofar as one family's activities can irreversibly disrupt the community as a whole; c) whereas Persaud's protagonist betrays a class- and caste-

privileged perspective, Mohammed's characters speak from their positions within a less affluent Indo-Trinidadian village; and d) whereas Persaud juxtaposes the patriarchal underpinnings of colonialism and Hinduism, Mohammed explicitly exposes the complicity of religious structures in the exploitation and confinement of female sexuality.

Conversely, the most notable similarity between Persaud's first novel *Butterfly in the Wind* and Sharlow Mohammed's first full-length novel, *The Elect*, is the centrality of the interrelated and long-established institutions of family and community among the descendants of Trinidad's formerly indentured peoples. Both Mohammed and Persaud project common tropes of community and commonality as real and vital expressions of diasporic identity. Even though each novelist writes against the stereotype of "East Indians" as a homogenous entity, their novels are nonetheless structured upon an overriding projection of community as the simultaneously limiting and empowering axis around which the diasporic subject's life revolves.

A comparative look at Mohammed and Persaud's novels, therefore, reveals that these communities are neither static replicas of their originary cultures nor an altogether exclusive or homogenous entity. These works echo Peter Nazareth and Farida Karodia's Africa-based novels insofar as they consciously seek to reverse Afro-centric and Eurocentric stereotypes alike, by first emphasizing the diversity of South Asian diasporic peoples, even within the close quarters of an Indo-Trinidadian village such as Palmist: "A couple of shops, a mosque, a Hindu temple, and a Presbyterian school and church met all Palmist's needs" (*TE* 9). In a more explicit gesture, Persaud writes against the "East Indian" stereotype: "Some may think that

because Pasea Villagers were East Indian, that there was amongst them a uniformity of colour and culture. What we had, in reality, was a mosaic of peoples.” (*BITW* 92). Moreover, Persaud debunks the “coolie” stereotype<sup>18</sup> in her portrait of the extended Maharaj family as a symbol of the diversification of the Indo-Trinidadian’s professional and economic base.

Though both novels consciously alert us to the relative heterogeneity of the diasporic community, neither novel offers a convincing or complex consideration of the ethnic and/or religious minorities within the South Asian diaspora itself. As V.S. Naipaul retrospectively testifies, religious differences and exclusivism affected intra-communal relations as much as it kept Indo-Trinidadians a community “apart”: “We knew nothing of Muslims. This idea of strangeness, of the thing to be kept outside, extended even to other Hindus” (Nobel Address 7). In fact, both novels resort to what I shall term the “Mrs. Mohammed archetype”: i.e., in each work there exists an elusive female character who sporadically slips into the narrative as a representative of Muslim orthodoxy within the greater Hindu community.

To a certain extent, it is fair to conclude that the absence of complex Muslim characters does in fact tell us a great deal about Indo-Caribbean demographics, wherein Hindus have traditionally far-outnumbered their Muslim neighbours. Indeed, an overwhelming eighty-five percent of the indentured labourers who emigrated to Trinidad were Hindus.<sup>19</sup> To this end, one might conclude that the relative innocuousness of “Mrs. Mohammed” is a comment on the relative harmonization of religious differences in the diasporic context. Indeed, both novelists aim to display that in villages like Palmist “differences of religion were no big thing” (*TE* 18). One might also conclude that these writers are prone to a degree of self-censorship in the

decided absence of a more in-depth look at Muslim-Hindu relations in their desire to emphasize a united diasporic front, such that the differences between “East Indian” and “West Indian” become the writers’ predominant concern.

However, in the virtual absence (or virtual presence) of Muslim characters in novels which otherwise consciously foreground their shared “South Asian” identity, the absence of a round Muslim character leaves something to be desired. The Mrs. Mohammed archetype is thus particularly apparent when posited against more fully developed Afro-Caribbean characters. In *The Elect*, for example, the Rastafarian figure of James Wellington is shown to have a greater role to play in the goings-on of the South Asian diasporic community than does Mrs. Mohammed. Even in her movements, Mrs Mohammed remains a furtive outsider who looks “out of the window of her upstairs house” while Wellington lives at the “[. . .] cross-roads of the trace” (24). The Mrs. Mohammed archetype notwithstanding, the figure of James Wellington confirms Jeremy Poynting’s insistence that Indo-Caribbean writing offers worthy representations of Afro-Indian relations by emphasizing “the increasing [racial] heterogeneity of the group” (“The African and the Asian Will Not Mix” 16).<sup>20</sup>

In a few brief paragraphs, Persaud echoes Naipaul’s account of intra-communal relations: “Moslems were not invited to our *kathas* and *pujas* and we were not invited to their mosques. So side by side we walked the dirt roads not knowing anything about the deeper feelings of the other” (*BITW* 93). However, Persaud’s investigation of “the tensions arising from such inner differences” (Poynting 16) is restricted to a handful of cursory observations. This is typified in Kamla’s recollection of her neighbour Mrs. Hassan’s refusal of Kamla’s mother’s dinner invitation (she won’t dine where the meat is not *halal*). Though Kamla points out that

Mrs. Hassan's standoffishness is the result of cultural misunderstanding, she nonetheless simplifies the latter's position as an unbending orthodoxy, particularly as a point of contrast with her championing of Hinduism as the more inclusive religion: "Our pundit had made me feel that in heaven there were all kinds of people, all faiths" (*BITW* 143); and again: "Hinduism is more open; therein lies its strength and weakness" (147). In other words, it is not her presence as a minor character that renders Mrs. Mohammed a problematic archetype but in the flattening of her character within an otherwise detailed consideration of a religious-centred diasporic consciousness.

As one of the first writers to give voice to this community, Persaud resorts to what Kenneth Ramchand aptly refers to as the novel's "nostalgic tone, its innocent ambivalence, and its non-punitive irony [. . . which] make less stressful some of the tensions brewing beneath the accommodating surface of what the writer still wants to project as a coherent world" ("Coming Out of Repression" 227). Indeed, Persaud often offers a simplified projection of "commonality" because its overriding impulse is to articulate a position of cultural and ideological cohesion in the wake of the text's subversion of other narratives of totalization.

This narrative dissonance rises to the surface in Kamla's observation of the diaspora's revitalized link with the originary homeland in the emergence of Indian independence. Here, the globally-felt effects of Indian independence underline James Clifford's assertion that the diaspora's political and other links usually exceed the country of settlement.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Kamla witnesses the decolonization of the Indian Subcontinent as a catalyst for more politicized assertions of cultural autonomy in the opening of independent schools; the resurgence of native language learning and



religious teachings; and greater financial investment on the part of Indian organizations, particularly religious-based movements such as *Arya Samaj*.

Kamla poignantly celebrates the direct impact of Indian independence on the diasporic consciousness in the image of Indo-Trinidadian school children singing the Indian national anthem and commemorating Indian Independence day. It is interesting to note, however, that the rebirth of a specifically “Indian” cultural consciousness is, in Kamla’s eyes, an unambiguously shared point of identification. Though Kamla poetically refers to Indian independence as a symbol of the Trinidadian’s shared struggle against European hegemony, her unqualified celebration of Indian nationalism glosses over its dominant Hindu discourse. As Brinda Mehta states, the majority Hindu group of Kamla’s Tunapuna community looked towards religion not only as a method of self-preservation but as a monolithic paradigm for an “Indian way of life whereby cultural monopoly compromises the scope for hybridity and a plurality of cultural experiences” (“Cultural Hegemony” 131). This can be seen in the following description of the *Sanatan Dharam Maha Sabha*, a doctrinal movement to which Kamla’s family is shown to belong:

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s the East Indian population in Trinidad grew rapidly. At this time came the Mahasabha Movement, men and women concerned that Trinidad Indians should become more fully conscious of the educational facilities on the island and of the rich inheritance of Indian classical dance, music, song and literature. It was felt that the more traditional, difficult and profound aspects of Indian culture were being neglected and their place taken by both Indian and Western popular culture displayed on our cinema screens. (183)

What Kamla overlooks in turning to Indian independence as a symbol of hope for Trinidadian inter-cultural and inter-racial unity, therefore, is the impact that the splitting apart of the Indian Subcontinent along religious lines would prove to have on

the diaspora's own variously stratified religious and regional allegiances or, conversely, on Afro-Indian relations themselves.<sup>22</sup> These extra-territorial links are, in Persaud's novel, treated with a matter-of-fact realism that neglects to account for the divisive undercurrents of Indian nationalist discourse. In other words, the prevailing impulse in Kamla's retrospective is her insistence on "community" and "commonality" in resistance to European hegemony without a concomitant investigation of the exclusivist politics of identity within the diasporic community, itself. This often dovetails into an us/them binary. For instance, when Kamla is outraged over a gender-biased Hindu morality (symbolized by the community's indifference toward a local elder's adulterous behaviour), she attributes the transgressor's self-imposed exile in Tobago among an alien black race an adequate, if not unduly severe, punishment: "As the years went by, I sometimes thought of him: living on a small, thinly populated island with his son, growing greyer amongst strangers, outside his own East Indian village community. What would the few black fishermen there know of him? [. . .]" (*BITW* 127).

Indeed, for Kamla, the issue of inter-racial differences outweighs that of intra-communal grievances, for the corrosion of cultural values is shown to be located in the external markers of an alien Afro-Caribbean culture and its collusion with British/white/Christian norms. Echoing the post-colonial writer's thematization of a colonial education, Persaud convincingly traces Kamla's growing alienation among a European school system that denigrates her religious and cultural sensibilities. In this sense, Kamla is fearful that racial integration will result in cultural assimilation unless the Indo-Trinidadian community takes control of its cultural institutions. For example, both Kamla's Afro-Caribbean teachers, Miss Mills and Mister Braithwaite,

are presented as colonial mimic men/women whose Eurocentric worldview cut to the very core of Kamla's Hindu/Indo-Trinidadian identity: "Our teacher, Miss Mills, was 'high-coloured'. [. . .] Miss Mills taught us the French and the American national anthems. [. . .] But there were no songs from India; [. . .] Anyone who knew Mr. Braithwaite could see that he had a secret desire to be a proper English gentleman" (*BITW* 53; 55).

Despite some of the obvious critical limitations of *Butterfly in the Wind*,<sup>23</sup> Persaud marks a turning point in Indo-Caribbean Literature by countering the long-standing tradition of "ornhi-covered," behind-the-scenes female characters found in her male counterparts' works. Persaud's novel resists the perpetuation of the "myth of the 'eternal feminine' in which women have been marginalized by a particular strategy of 'narrative petrification' [. . . as] passive receptacles of the male writer's unconscious" (Mehta 125). Thus, she gives voice to three generations of women, each of whom embodies the gradual liberation of the female subaltern migrant from the confines of a tightly-reined plantation estate community that is further subject to the proscriptions of Hinduism.

Though Kamla's conservatism confirms Partha Chatterjee's argument<sup>24</sup> that, as the primary bearers of tradition, women are central to the upkeep of the community's cultural and spiritual core, the women of her Tunapuna community are also shown to be the unacknowledged economic backbone of a community that is ravaged by alcoholism and material hardship. In communities for which alcoholism has historically served as a means of escape from the drudgery and toil of plantation

labour, particularly among its male constituency. Persaud reveals that it is women who are often left to shoulder the various responsibilities of family:

Daya had good Fridays and bad Fridays. On the good Fridays, her husband came to the gate, called out to her and brought her his wage. She, in return, handed him enough for three more drinks [. . .]. Her bad Fridays were when she had to hurry to the rum shop before he spent it all. (*BITW* 39-40)

Kamla's astute perception that women bear the brunt of an economically disadvantaged community is nonetheless compromised by her seeming oblivion to her family's complicity in continuing patterns of social dysfunction given their ownership of the local rum shop. Indeed, this bittersweet irony--one that is further reinforced by the fact that rum-drinking would have "gone against proscriptions of both Hindu and Muslim religious practice" (Niehoff, "East Indians" 85)--seems altogether lost on the protagonist: "I couldn't understand why the police were upset if people wanted to purchase a bottle to drink at home on a Sunday and my father was prepared to sell it" (*BITW* 34). In other words, while Persaud attempts to deconstruct the myth of a male-centred dominance while simultaneously critiquing its sites of female repression, her text often collapses under the weight of "an indulgent nostalgia" (Birbalsingh, *From Pillar to Post* 58) or its overly "accommodating surface" (Ramchand 227).

To this end, though Mohammed might not give voice to the female diasporic subject as vividly as does Persaud, he offers a more even-handed critique of the power dynamics at play in the exploitation of female sexuality. Indeed, *The Elect* exposes the hypocrisies of communal solidarity when it comes to gender stratifications. In such an equation, the women of Palmist are shown to be the most easily targeted casualties of various forms of exploitation, both in their deployment as

the bearers of tradition and in their own search for alternate conceptions of female subjectivity. For instance, the evangelizing Pastor capitalizes on the Palmist women's shared desire to resist their community's "male-prescribed cultural mandates for Hindu women" (Mehta 126).

As Mohammed demonstrates, Pastor Goberdan skilfully manipulates each woman's latent desire to challenge existing gender inequalities. Thus, he easily convinces Sorijini that the church will afford her a degree of autonomy not found in her own religion: "She say the church going to be she own, an' she done with this blasted *ka, ka, ja, ja, wa, wa*, an' with wearing orhni" (*TE* 35). Similarly, in a thematic echo of Kamla's realization of a gender-biased Hindu morality, Shanti, Sorijini's mother, feels vindicated by the Pastor's condemnation of her husband's transgressive behaviour:

'It's about your husband I've come to speak, Shanti. [. . .] The Lord will not tolerate drunkenness and fornication. It's your duty as a Christian woman to make your husband stop drinking and committing adultery.'

'But Pastor, he doh listen to one word ah say [. . .].'

'[. . .] Your husband's drinking is offensive to the Lord. You are the chosen, you know. And no matter what you do your place in Heaven is secure.' (73-4)

In the Pastor's devious manipulations of the Palmist women, Mohammed identifies the complicit patriarchal structures inherent in competing religious and cultural codes of conduct. To this end, the Pastor's doctrine of "salvation" is exposed as yet another hegemony in its racist ethic, its dismissal of education as a praxis of evil and its unbridled exploitation of female sexuality.

In a society that is paradoxically held together and torn asunder by religious beliefs and customs, Mohammed enshrouds his younger female characters in a trinity

of religious archetypes: i.e., the three women who vie for Tom's attention can be seen as Indrani, the temptress; Sorijini, the chaste; and Mary, the virgin. To a certain extent, "Mrs. Mohammed" falls in line with these religious archetypes. However, Tom's indifference to Mrs. Mohammed and her daughters' activities stands in contrast to his visceral dissatisfaction with his female peers' limited range of social and cultural expectations. The latter reaction underlines Tom's dissatisfaction with the limited tropes of female subjectivity available to women in a tightly controlled socioreligious environment.

Tom, himself, is shown to be subtly implicated in this patriarchal structure for though he seems fed up with "stereotypical" female behaviour, he is unable to conceptualize a more viable and complex alternative for female identity. Indeed, though it is his intellectual female companion, Mary, who convinces him to attend university, Tom's frustrated sexual desires thwart an otherwise promising romance with a potential "equal." Moreover, Tom is unable to partake in the villager's unspoken admiration for Shanti's metamorphosis from a brow-beaten housewife to an independent thinker who single-handedly brings about the Pastor's downfall: "Tom could not bear it any longer. He could not feel part of either the church and their fraudulent pastor nor this rumshop delight in revenge" (175).

Though Indo-Caribbean writing seems invariably committed to wider Caribbean society in its resistance to colonial and neoimperial forms of oppression, it nonetheless foregrounds cultural and ethnic distinctiveness as a rejection of the assimilative processes of "westernization" and "creolization." In fact, as has already been seen in the Guyanese context, there is a recurring subtext in Indo-Caribbean writing in which creolization (or cultural hybridization) is attributed to a form of

assimilation to the dominant “western” cultural models as they are articulated in wider Caribbean society.

In her study of the deployment of the Indo-Trinidadian subaltern female in Trinidadian nationalist discourse, Shalini Puri points to the centrality of the “douglarization debate” which erupted in the 1990s. Referring to the Hindi term for “bastard,” “dougla” entered the Trinidadian vocabulary to apply to peoples of mixed Indian and African descent. Puri argues that both conservative Afro- and Indo-Caribbean nationalist discourse had posited in symmetrical ways the image of the “dougla” and that of the chaste “Indian” woman to maintain racial demarcations in contemporary Caribbean society. As Puri asserts, “What these stereotypes produce for dominant cultural nationalist discourses is the fiction of one seamless and monolithic racial community with common interests pitted against another seamless and monolithic racial community with common interests” (“Race, Rape and Representation” 127). In other words, deviant forms of “Indian” female subjectivity are attributed to the westernizing effects of creolization, and therefore seen as a rejection of the model Indian girl’s “strictly controlled” sexuality (121).<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, the “douglarization debate” can be seen to play itself out, to different ends, in Persaud’s and Mohammed’s texts: whereas Persaud often sidesteps the issue of the diasporic community’s own proclivity towards a racially segregationist and culturally purist discourse, Mohammed makes explicit the pejorative connotation of the “dougla” in the pastor’s subservient accomplice, Brother Samuel, and Tom’s love interest, Mary. In the hybrid identities of the “slim dougla” Brother Samuel and the “chaste” Mary, Mohammed satirizes the Indo-Trinidadian community’s suspicion of racial hybridity. Consequently, Mohammed can be said to rewrite the “dougla”

narrative within the context of a community that has often broken calls to intercultural solidarity on the basis of its own inherent racialism.

For instance, Mary's genealogy is a matter for local speculation and gossip: "And when Tom asked how come Mary was Indian and Mrs. Penco was Portuguese, Lal had just chuckled over his beer: 'People mix-up like callalou all over the place, oui'" (TE 29). Moreover, even though Mary claims to identify herself with the Indo-Caribbean members of Palmist insofar as her brother is "a labourer," her ambiguous genealogical ties to the local estate-owning family (the remnants of the European plantocracy) relegates her to the margins of the Palmist community, such that even her romance with Tom transpires in the form of clandestine meetings on the village outskirts. But Mohammed comically inverts the stereotype of the "promiscuous female" in Mary's vow of abstinence until marriage; moreover, Mary's chastity comes across as a seemingly informed decision rather than as an act of conformity to communal expectations.

Similarly, Mohammed endows his "douglar" character with a taste of poetic justice which none of his other characters enjoys: i.e., the reader comes to appreciate Brother Samuel's elopement with the Pastor's daughter as a justifiable act of revenge. Indeed, Brother Samuel's gradual resistance to the racist and self-serving Pastor is a sub-text throughout *The Elect*: "Samuel, who sat beside the pastor's daughter, raged silently. For years he'd served Giberdan faithfully. Now even the crumbs were being denied him, crumbs which had given him a little respect and status in the church" (148).

In Palmist, then, it is not inter-racial mixing that the community need fear as much as an uncritical adherence to exclusivist doctrines (be they religious or secular).



Thus, the American-imported evangelical missions act as cultural predators which prey on the weakest members of the community in their extraction of tithes and their degradation of local sociocultural practices:

Tom had never seen the likes of it in Palmist. By early Saturday morning, the village was full of men with jackets and ties; youths with slick hairstyles and three-piece suits copied from the American TV soap operas; Indian women and girls with perms; African women with straightened hair; women of both races clutching handbags and wearing stockings, all sweating under the stifling crop-time heat, a haze of cheap perfume hanging in the still air. (52)

For a community besieged by forms of American cultural imperialism, therefore, Naipaul's paradigmatic "escape to an autumn pavement" is ironized as a self-defeating journey toward the site of economic and cultural hegemony.

Instead, Tom finds himself intellectually and emotionally distanced from a community that has itself undergone a figurative departure from a particular way of life. In the most ironic sense, then, the collective has figuratively moved "westward," in its uncritical mimicry of western models of consumerism, its debt-ridden economy and the subsequent erosion of cultural autonomy and material self-sufficiency: "They had returned to the edge of the village, and the long trace next to where Tom lived. Even here, isolated from the rest of Palmist, there'd been change. Much of the bush and the trees [. . .] had been hacked away to make space for the new concrete flats; yards no longer cackled with ducks and poultry; [. . .]" (16).

Persaud's Trinidad-based novels<sup>26</sup> also incorporate the recurring motif of departure to the western metropolis, though in Kamla's case the journey is rife with the connotations of her multiply positioned diasporic identity. In keeping with post-colonial themes, Kamla's departure is a natural extension of her colonial destiny: "But there was a built-in assumption, never questioned, that going abroad by its very

nature meant a transformation of self, a dramatic improvement of one's status. One would join the professional classes, or become rich with fairy-tale speed" (*BITW* 199). Indeed, Kamla's departure is reminiscent of Annie John, the title character of Jamaica Kincaid's first autobiographical novel.<sup>27</sup> Both girls are breaking out of the conventional paths of womanhood; that is, the traditional cycles of an early marriage and its incumbent family duties. Echoing the fate awaiting Farida Karodia's female characters in the South African context,<sup>28</sup> however, both Kamla and Annie perceive the "inevitability" of departure as a paradoxical dead-end, for the doubly marginalizing forces of colonialism and patriarchy limit a subaltern woman's professional avenues to such occupations as teaching or nursing.

Though Brinda Mehta rightly suggests that Persaud's female protagonists' journeys abroad serve as a viable means of escape from the strictures of Hinduism, I would argue that Kamla's journey functions less as a rejection of Hindu orthodoxy than as a paradoxical conformity to communal expectations. This is because traditional apprehensions that might have otherwise restricted a woman's social mobility are often forfeited in the diasporic community which looks to each member's economic and social advancement as a form of collective empowerment. In this sense, individual mobility is seen as a vehicle for collective strength: as the first female to be afforded a higher education, Kamla's university training is simultaneously a break with tradition and a symbol of the family's elevated place in the social hierarchy, for now the Maharaj family patriarch can "finance not only his son but also his daughter" (*BITW* 201). Moreover, Kamla's higher education further ensures the community's cultural survival since it will provide her with the necessary credentials with which to teach in one of the new "Indian-run" schools.

Despite Annie and Kamla's shared protestations against their common colonial destiny, there exists a fundamental difference in attitude found in each character's "departure" from family, community and country. For Annie, the cut of the umbilical cord that ties her to the mother and motherland is as bitter as it is final: "[. . .] the road for me now went only in one direction: away from my home, away from my mother [. . .]" (Kincaid, *Annie John* 134). In contrast, Kamla's departure is not perceived as a permanent departure but as a return journey that signals the family's assurance of a more secure footing in their Caribbean homeland.

In other words, Kamla's departure is grounded in the discourse of indenture history. It is thus among "a series of narratives" (Mishra, "(B)ordering Naipaul" 226) of indenture as a process of migration, labour, enterprise and, eventually, material and social advancement. To this end, Kamla's aunt comments, "'Who would have thought of a day like this when our grandmothers and great grandmothers left India, not knowing where they were going? All they were told was that there would be work. They came in good faith; they placed themselves in God's hands. And look at this now, look at this success story'" (*BITW* 201). Moreover, as the first female in her community to travel overseas, Kamla marks a turning point in the multi-generational history of South Asian diasporic women: "[. . .] a female child, disadvantaged by custom – an untold of freedom of privilege – at much personal sacrifice to themselves. They were sweeping aside time-honoured ways of thinking of their own volition" (202).

As the extended family comes to send off their prodigal daughter on her historic journey, therefore, the event is described as a collective spiritual act, punctuated with readings from the *Ramayana* and Kamla's instinctive use of Hindu

custom to publicly acknowledge her parents' "personal sacrifice." Similarly, in being one of the first to afford the modern amenities of travel, the community is about to witness a reversal of the historical scar produced by the dehumanizing historic voyage across the *kala pani*: "Others talked about how different travel was now – the days of six months from India were over; of how bad it had been in the old ships and how many had died. Things had changed for the better; they were so happy for me" (201).

Like Edward Said's claim that the immigrant can transform the anxiety of exile into a critical vantage point between "mass institutions," the diasporic subject's exposure to other ideological discourses carries with it a similar potential for "scrupulous subjectivity" (Said "Mind of Winter" 54): on the one hand, religious and other forms of indoctrination are shown to be an ideological assault on the South Asian diasporic subject's sense of cultural selfhood; on the other hand, the exposure to multiple belief systems functions as a critical disruption of an inward-looking community. Though Kamla and Tom are steeped in the institutions of their cultural and political communities, the extreme ideological disjunctures inherent in these conflicting models—in social, political and religious terms—helps each character cultivate a degree of critical distance.

For example, Mohammed underscores the transition from colonial to neocolonial practices in the "corrupt and exclusive church" (*TE* 162), alongside the Hindu Pundit's similarly extortionist drive for 'tithes': "Even Pundit Maharaj, whom he'd given five thousand dollars to do to puja, came round whining for more, [. . .]" (67). Similarly, the more Kamla is exposed to forms of Christian indoctrination the more she begins to question the patriarchal tenets of her own Hindu faith. Conversely,

the more she finds her Hindu heritage denigrated by a Christian missionary education in its assault on her “notion of self” (*BITW* 175), the more politicized her cultural and religious identity becomes. As I have suggested, however, Kamla’s “scrupulous subjectivity” is articulated as an “inner voice” (55) that is often negated by an overarching desire to outwardly “project a coherent world” (Ramchand 227).

A comparative consideration of these novels thus reveals that community and commonality are as much projected fictions as they are realistic articulations of diasporic identity as an alignment of shared experiences in the face of displacement, diversity and a racially divisive history. To this end, each novel highlights the centrality of a shared sense of community that is “family and kinship oriented” (Samaroo, “Politics and Afro-Indian Relations” 84). Moreover, in the process of settlement and acculturation over multiple generations, these communities have come to typify what James Clifford refers to as “a processual configuration of historically given elements—including race, culture, class, gender, and sexuality—different combinations of which may be featured in different conjunctures” (“Travelling Cultures” 116). To Clifford’s list, however, one must add the vital element of religion as it informs the South Asian diasporic subject’s daily activities, social interactions and cultural infrastructures.

The preservation and centrality of religious beliefs are the edifying element for communities in which such terms as *Hosay* festivals, *jharaying* and *pujas* do not signify alien ways of life but everyday rituals which have as central a place in Trinidadian society as Obeah practices and Church congregations. Indeed, in the community of Palmist, Mohammed subtly hints at the fact that even the Rastafarian James Wellington has surrendered “unclean foods like pork” for the Palmist lifestyle

of “clean, natural living” (*TE* 133). Similarly, Kamla’s misgivings over Baboo’s ability to survive in a dominant black Caribbean society says much about her alternate belief in the necessity of the Indo-Caribbeans’ mutual inter-dependence or “shared experiences” (*BITW* 127).

While Persaud’s text emphasizes the integrity of religious practices and customs as a necessary prerequisite to greater assertions of cultural autonomy in a dominant Christian, Afro-Caribbean environment, Mohammed’s text serves as a cautionary tale against doctrines of exclusivism: “The church of the chosen had divided the villagers [. . .] Pullbassie’s and Lal’s families had their Bhagavan; James his Jah; Mrs. Mohammed her Allah; Shanti her Deo; and the chosen had their own exclusive Jesus” (*TE* 180). Though Mohammed hints at religious belief and custom as one of the unifying features of the diasporic community, he simultaneously critiques the deployment of religious doctrine when practiced as a totalizing system of exclusion, cultural isolationism and/or discourse of power.

Despite their particular vantage points, both authors identify the seeds of exploitation in the assimilative processes of urbanization and westernization. Thus, Kamla’s growing involvement with urban Trinidadian society functions as a conflict between her eastern upbringing and western schooling, such that she is a “displaced person between two worlds whose rules of etiquette were foreign, one to another” (*BITW* 175). Similarly, Tom realizes that the Palmist community’s subjection to foreign investment and imported doctrines sends them on a downward cultural and economic spiral in which the Hindu “bhajan” is no match for the television and the Pastor’s resounding “microphone” (*TE* 147).

In both the Palmist and Tunapuna community, a collective diasporic consciousness is disseminated in formal functions (such as religious ceremonies and official town meetings) and informal social interactions such as the free-flowing exchange of news and gossip. In *The Elect*, for instance, it is in the context of gossip that the community is involved in critical channels of dialogue and debate over issues such as the Presbyterian versus Evangelical missions. Similarly, in Kamla's community, the social and public nature of the extended family acts as an intricate network of critical communication over everyday concerns (e.g., family well-being), polemical events (e.g., inter-caste marriages) and current affairs (e.g., inter-ethnic relations).

Community is the centripetal force of diasporic experience, therefore, one that is shown to be facing increasing extinction in the more contemporary setting of *The Elect*. By disclosing both the points of disjuncture and commonality inherent in these particular Indo-Trinidadian fictions, I believe that what comes across is not the falsely projected image of community implied by the term "fiction," but rather a more honest look at South Asian diasporic experience as a "relative" positioning within conflictual, competing and often complicit ideological systems. Moreover, in Mohammed and Persaud's texts, we are able to apprehend how fictions of community and commonality are, in Stuart Hall's paradigmatic sense,<sup>29</sup> as much a conscious positioning within the narratives of the past as an unconscious subversion of dominant and/or assimilative cultural practices. In both texts, therefore, the question of "faith" in the diasporic ties that bind is continually put to the test, while the question of belonging is paradoxically symbolized in Kamla's ephemeral yet inexorable "butterfly in the wind" or Tom's dogged certainty that "Upper Palmist had

changed irretrievably [ . . . ]. There was no going back” (TE 180).



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Hugh Tinker's "Indian Migration to the West Indies" and K. Laxmi Narayan's demographic overview of the "Indian Diaspora."

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Dash's *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context*.

<sup>3</sup> See Christina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1987), Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Ian McDonald's *The Hummingbird Tree* (1969), etc. These are examples in which the sea or water imagery are central to the novel's internal structure and themes as they pertain to issues of identity.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Dash and Elizabeth Deloughery formulate a similar aesthetics of the Caribbean as an "archipelagraphic" cross-cultural space as it is grounded in Edouard Glissant's theorization of Caribbean history and identity.

<sup>5</sup> See Mishra's theorization of indentureship in "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora." Mishra calls this diaspora the old Indian diaspora of exclusivism or a self-contained "little India."

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 2 on Mauritius for a detailed contextualization of the Pass System.

<sup>7</sup> See Bridget Brereton's "The Experience of Indentureship :1845-1917" and Kelvin Singh's "East Indians in the Larger Society" in *Calcutta to Caroni: The East Indians of Trinidad* for a discussion of the missionary school system and its impact on the indentured community.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 2 on Mauritius for a contextualization of the trope of the "jahaji bhai." For theoretical discussions, see Vijay Mishra and Frank Birbalsingh.

<sup>9</sup> All parenthetical references to *The Elect* will be cited as *TE*. All citations are from the original (1992) Peepal Tree Press edition.

<sup>10</sup> See specifically Naipaul's England-set novel, *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), as well as his Caribbean-set fiction, specifically *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) and *The Mimic Men* (1967).

<sup>11</sup> See Robin Cohen's discussion of indentured peoples in *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* and Vijay Mishra's "(B)ordering Naipaul: Indenture History and Diasporic Poetics."

<sup>12</sup> See Birbalsingh's discussion of Naipaul in his Introduction to the literary anthology *Jahaji* and his collection of articles and reviews, *From Pillar to Post: The Indo-Caribbean Diaspora*. See also Dolly Zulakha Hassan's comparative study of western and non-western criticism on V.S. Naipaul's oeuvre.

<sup>13</sup> All parenthetical references to *Butterfly in the Wind* will be cited as *BITW*. All citations are from the original (1990) Peepal Tree Press edition.

<sup>14</sup> The *Ramleela* is a dramatization of the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*. See Walcott's Nobel Address, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory."

<sup>15</sup> Persaud's second novel, *Sastra* (1993) is also set in her childhood community of Tunapuna. *Sastra* is, in many ways, a sequel to *Butterfly in the Wind*, wherein the female protagonist returns from her studies abroad to teach in one of the local schools. Persaud's third and most recent novel is a serious departure from her previous works. *For the Love of My Name* (2000) is a fictional account of the Burnham years of Guyana's tumultuous political history. Persaud therefore turns her attention to the more 'regional' and 'global' concerns of neoimperial political oppression and racial division in the fictitious Caribbean island community of Maya. Her novel offers an interesting point of comparison with Narmala Shewcharan's *Tomorrow is Another Day*.

<sup>16</sup> Over a series of email communications, Peepal Tree Press publisher and literary critic Jeremy Poynting provided me with the biographical details of Persaud and Mohammed's life noted in this chapter.

<sup>17</sup> Canadian Reverend John A. Morton founded a Presbyterian Missionary School System in the late 1800s, which offered the children of indenture communities access to education. This often resulted in the child's conversion to Christianity while his/her parents retained their faith. The resultant spiritual and psychic rift between child and parent, younger and older generations, is another common motif in Indo-Caribbean Literature that is worth exploring further. For instance, fruitful comparisons could be

made between Mohammed's *The Elect* and Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* in which religious conversion results in psychological and social dysfunction.

<sup>18</sup> The coolie stereotype has followed the indentured labourer across the globe and has remained relatively consistent in its prejudicial outlook: thus, the East Indian was often regarded as a thrifty, uncivilized heathen of the lowest social rung. (See Frank Birbalsingh's discussion of indenture experience in *From Pillar to Post: The Indo-Caribbean Diaspora* and his introductory essays to *Indenture and Exile*, and the *Jahaji* anthologies; see also Bridget Brereton's "The Experience of Indentureship: 1845-1917"; see Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery* for the historical conditions which brought about the coolie stereotype.)

<sup>19</sup> J.C. Jha notes that the majority of peoples came from the northern regions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, while the minority principally came from the southern region of Madras. The proportion of Hindus to Muslims was 85% (Hindu) to 14% Muslim by 1901. (See J.C. Jha's overview of the demographic and social make-up of South Asians in Trinidad: "The Indian Heritage in Trinidad" in *Calcutta to Caroni: The East Indians of Trinidad*.)

<sup>20</sup> In fact, Jeremy Poynting notes that the Indo-Caribbean writer is aware of "a wider society" whereas the Afro-Caribbean writer has tended to ignore the Indian presence (though, as he points out, this is also a changing trend). His examples of the former group are Sam Selvon's *A Brighter Sun* and Ismith Khan's *Jumbie Bird*. (See "The African and the Asian Will Not Mix (A. Froude): African-Indian Relations in Caribbean Fiction: A Reply.")

<sup>21</sup> See James Clifford's discussion of how diasporas define themselves against the local nation-state and nativist/indigenous claims in his seminal study, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*.

<sup>22</sup> Though these racial tensions are themselves undergoing further critical examination and debate, Brinsley Samaroo echoes other scholars in his suggestion that "Afro-Indian" tensions came about as a combination of the British Empires' racially divisive infrastructure and racial prejudices, and the emergence of the Pan-African movement and Indian Independence. According to Samaroo, "The visits of Indian missionaries and high commissioners, especially after 1947, and the revival of

the Sanatan Dharam Maha Sabha dashed whatever hope there remained of Afro-Indian solidarity" (96). (See "Politics and Afro-Indian Relations in Trinidad" in *Calcutta to Caroni : The East Indians of Trinidad*.)

23 Both Kenneth Ramchand and Brinda Mehta touch on the conservative undercurrent in Persaud's *Butterfly in the Wind*, which makes the novel "symptomatic of the condition it is trying to describe" (Ramchand 227).

<sup>24</sup> See Chapters 2 and 4 for a contextualization of Chatterjee's paradigm of the deployment of women as the bearers of tradition in nationalist discourse, found in his theorization of Indian nationalist discourse, *The Nation and its Fragments*

<sup>25</sup> See Shalini Puri's article "Race, Rape, and Representation: Indo-Caribbean Women and Cultural Nationalism" for a detailed account of the deployment of Indian female sexuality in Trinidadian nationalist discourse.

<sup>26</sup> Persaud's first two novels *Butterfly in the Wind* and *Sastra* are set in Trinidad.

<sup>27</sup> See Jamaica Kincaid's autobiographical fiction, *Annie John*--another fruitful point of comparison for further study.

<sup>28</sup> See my discussion of Farida Karodia's *Daughters of the Twilight* in Chapter 3, (the East African context).

<sup>29</sup> See Chapter 1 for a discussion of Hall's paradigm of the process of diasporic identity formation as a "positioning" between the past and present.

## **PART IV - Southeast Asia**

## **Chapter 6 - Malaysia & Singapore**

**Texts that ‘Speak’ for Themselves: The Politics of (the ‘English’) Language  
in K.S. Maniam’s *The Return* and Gopal Baratham’s *A Candle or the Sun***

The majority of South Asian peoples to have permanently settled in Southeast Asia by the nineteenth century followed the common patterns of migration under the colonial administration--i.e., as “Indentured Labourers” or “Free Passengers.” South Asian immigrants came to the Malaysian Peninsula as estate labourers who quickly dominated the dense rubber plantations. In contrast, since such plantations were scarce on the small island colony of Singapore (which was primarily used by the British Empire as a major naval base), immigrants were essentially employed as civil servicemen/women and for public services such as policing, sanitation, etc.

In both regions, a large proportion of immigrants also came in the spirit of entrepreneurship, opening up wholesale and retail trades that have come to mark Southeast Asia with the colours, textures and tastes of South Asian culture. One need only enter the bustling avenues of Singapore’s “Little India” to find oneself enamoured by the kaleidoscopic colours of hand-embroidered silk saris, the glint of gold bangles, the enticing aromas of South Indian cuisine, the blaring beats of the latest Bollywood soundtrack and, of course, the multiple voices--Tamil, Malayalam, Gujarati, Urdu, etc.—of South Asia.

Southeast Asia is nonetheless unique in so far as these immigrants were not venturing into alien territory but to a land that had already been indelibly marked, for over a millennium, by the religious imprint of Hinduism and Buddhism, and by over ten centuries of Islam. Indeed, well before the era of European colonization,

Southeast Asia was itself a vital crossroads in the transmission of the ancient belief systems, goods and cultural resources of Asia's major civilizations.

As Milton W. Meyer states, "The Indic Culture, in both Hindu and Buddhist forms began to manifest itself strikingly by the second century A.D. in both mainland and insular areas. The Indian legacy was perhaps the most significant feature of this period in Southeast Asian history" (*Asia* 59). In addition, Islam made its presence felt by the thirteenth century, and by the fifteenth century the Malaysian Peninsula was flourishing as an heterogeneous, commercial, maritime community where "Javanese, Sumatrans, Persians, Chinese, Arabs, Parsees, Bengalis, and Gujrats rubbed shoulders" (160). In fact, under the Islamic sultanate, Malacca (an important historical region on the south-western coast of the Malaysian Peninsula) housed the most influential port in Southeast Asia.

The South Asian diaspora thus forms part of an ancient chain of historical, cultural and religious ties between the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> The massive exodus of South Asian peoples to Southeast Asia by the mid to late nineteenth century was thus not a complete severing of the cultural cord but a subsequent impression in the flesh of what was already existent in Southeast Asian spirit and culture. For example, shared cultural values of family and community, together with the centrality of religious practices in daily life, helped ease intercultural tensions. In his comparative sociological account of the South Asian presence in Malaysia and Singapore, Sinnappah Arasaratnam writes:

The movement of people and ideas before modern times may in a sense be said to have made the more intensive modern movement of people less painful. It may be argued that short-term migration and settlement in Malaya was already part of Indian history and tradition [...]. It certainly explains the ease with which the Indian settled down, since



the country was not far different from his own. He had come into a society, which in its institutions, its habits of daily life, and even its basic cultural values, was not totally alien to his own [. . .]. The Indian in Malaya, unlike the Indian in the West Indian islands or the colonies of East and South Africa, did not feel himself so completely alienated from his environment or so drastically separated from the indigenous people. (*Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* 8-9).

Of course, the historical umbilical cord connecting Southeast Asia to the Indian Subcontinent did not eliminate the itinerant hardships of colonial rule nor alleviate the painful process of migration and resettlement. Rather, the intimate historical ties between these two regions, underscored by their geographic and cultural proximity, presented a far less alienating environment for South Asian diasporic peoples therein. Diasporic Muslims, for instance, have tended to integrate quite comfortably into a society so embedded in Islamic civilization. This process of accommodation came full circle when post-independence Malaysia became an Islamic Republic, bringing Muslim South Asians even closer to greater Malaysian society, immersed as it is in Islamic practices and beliefs. As Arasaratnam confirms, “Among Indian Muslims who have been settled for several generations there is a distinct tendency to merge with Malay Muslims, [. . .]” (176).

As each of these chapters points out, however, such observations must necessarily be nuanced in terms of the diversity of South Asian diasporic peoples themselves.<sup>2</sup> For example, unlike the other diasporic regions under study, the ethnic make-up of South Asian diasporic peoples in Malaysia and Singapore is dominated by South Indian and Ceylonese Tamils who represent around seventy-seven percent of ethnic South Asians. The remainder is comprised of Punjabis, Bengalis, Gujaratis and Sindhis.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as elsewhere in the South Asian diaspora, numerous factors have strained group dynamics, such as “occupational specialization” (Ampalavanar,

*The Indian Minority* 1); stratified group interests; ties to the motherland; the eruption of Indian nationalist discourses; and the internal political climate, to name only a few.<sup>4</sup>

In post-independence Malaysia and Singapore, language has come to constitute one such major infrastructural and cultural factor of differentiation. In Malaysia, the turn to indigenous Malay as the national language necessarily ushered the former colonial tongue to the backdoor of the political and social arena. However, unlike other minority languages such as Tamil and Mandarin, English has continued to boast a certain degree of elitism in its “internationality.” Nonetheless, more than a hundred million people now “speak the local and national language, Malay, with greater ease than they did English” (Yook 277). Yet to the diasporic subject who is often neither completely “at home” in the mother tongue (be it Tamil, Hindi, Urdu, etc.) nor the “step-mother tongue”<sup>5</sup> (English), the most obvious signifier of the irreversibility of change and irrecoverability of the past can be said to manifest itself linguistically.

Indeed, even the most cursory glance, such as the scope of this study will permit, of the complex linguistic and cultural context of Southeast Asia is indispensable to an understanding of Singaporean and Malaysian Literature in English. Suffice it to say that one of the most striking features in the content and criticism of Malaysian and Singaporean Literature in English is the issue of language itself. In the multilingual Southeast Asian context, a literary work’s linguistic medium says much about a writer’s orientation to his/her community. Though the English language carries its by now familiar resonance as a colonial tongue in this

region, it has come to occupy considerably different positions in its “minority” or “official” status in post-independence Malaysia and Singapore, respectively.

The prominence of present-day Malaysia’s linguistic minorities in the production of English language literature is itself a conspicuous reminder of the linguistically-aligned politics of identity therein. In fact, it would seem that among South Asian diasporic writers in Malaysia, it is writers of Hindu background who produce the majority of English language literary texts rather than their seemingly more culturally and linguistically integrated Muslim counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Although he seems to overstate the case, T. Wignesan rightly foregrounds the distinct correlation between a writer’s religious background and his/her language of choice in the context of this Islamic Republic: “Where race is synonymous with religion, it is hardly surprising that language remains the point of contention of both [. . .]. In a land where the national and living tongue is Malay, the English language offers a refuge: it is the religion of he who chooses to write in it” (“Religion as Refuge” 77).

Singapore tells a very different story to its parent Malaysian society. In its official policy of “multiracialism,” sociologist John Clammer states that in Singapore there is a “deliberate heightening of ethnic awareness through the imposition of a scheme of social classification that requires every citizen [. . .] to have a race, and to have it in what is officially expected to be an unambiguous way” (*Race and State* 12). As Clammer illustrates, “race” combines ethnicity and language, such that, “officially” speaking, there exist Mandarin-speaking Chinese, Tamil-speaking Indians, Malay-speaking Malays and English-speaking “Others” (that is, Europeans, Eurasians, Arabs, etc.). Tamil is identified as one of the four official languages in

Singapore because, as in the Malaysian context, it is the language spoken by the dominant (South Indian/Ceylonese) Tamil community.

In what has proved to be one of the most inter-racially harmonious societies in the world, it is fair to say that cultural and linguistic marginalization is less acutely manifested in Singaporean society than it is elsewhere. Nevertheless, the proliferation of diversity among diasporic peoples suggests that there are necessary exclusions and gaps in Singapore's "quadratomy" (Clammer 4) or "four-races" model.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the Chinese-dominant body politic has, according to most observers of Singaporean society, tended to privilege Mandarin over and above other Chinese languages as well as the other officially acknowledged linguistic groups. In this regard, Clammer speaks of "a basically Chinese cultural bias" (24) in Singaporean society.

While Clammer foregrounds the Chinese cultural bias prevalent in Singapore, literary critics foreground the English cultural bias in the literary arena. This cultural bias has appeared in what is the relatively "nascent" stage of Singaporean English Literature itself.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the Singaporean establishment had traditionally envisaged English as a technical, business-oriented medium which was to be kept separate from the Asian-based languages of cultural expression. This situates English within an oddly paradoxical position as a simultaneously authoritative and transgressive medium of cultural expression. This relatively unforeseen development suggests that though English has pervaded most public spheres of communication, it still occupies a tenuous hold on Singaporean cultural consciousness.

To this end, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim speaks of the hierarchical register of English as a language that "is not in actuality either a neutral or a bridge language except in a rather simple-minded use of the terms" (*Writing South/East Asia* 115).

Thus, when it comes to English language literary production in Singapore, Geok-Lin Lim asserts that one must take into consideration the fact that the majority of writers who use English as a literary medium “belong to the small English-educated elite whose interests are inextricably bound up with governmental, bureaucratic aims [. . .]” (126).<sup>9</sup> Conversely, Geok-Lin Lim convincingly suggests that literary critics have thus far “overlooked” the Singaporean literary tradition itself because it is most often assessed by “Western ideals of aesthetic and grammatical standards, stylistic and formal achievements derived wholly from the canon and traditions of British and American Literature” (118).<sup>10</sup>

What the two very different contexts of Malaysia and Singapore reveal, therefore, is that English is hardly a “neutral” language in either national context. Indeed, both K.S. Maniam and Gopal Baratham are, to differing degrees, “using a fringe language (in Malay dominant Malaysia), producing a fringe product (in pragmatic, mercantile Singapore), centering themselves in fringe cultures and ideologies (for example, immigrant ethnic communities or Westernized mentalities)” (Geok-Lin Lim, “Centers and the Fringe” 154). To complicate matters, English is often the preferred literary medium not simply for those writers seeking to reach an international audience, but, as Wignesan suggests, for those wishing to make a local statement that often runs counter to national interests. Indeed, Maniam himself seems determined to change local attitudes to English-language writing: “For those of us who are involved in this business, the task seems to be [. . .] to produce more literature in English, so that students in the Malaysian education system can realise that being a writer in this language and in this country is not a foreign thing” (Interview 2).

In other words, though the colonial resonance of English is common to both regions, the different ways in which English is institutionalized and deployed in Malaysia and Singapore speaks as much of the present-day political and social climate of each region as it does of its shared history of British rule.<sup>11</sup> In the most recent survey of Malaysian English Fiction to date, Wong Ming Yook accounts for English-language usage in Malaysia as follows:

The move downward from a common administrative language to a language used by an urban minority has meant that users and writers of English have become increasingly marginalized; simultaneously, English has contributed to an increasingly fragmented context in which it stands alongside other local (and limited) vernaculars such as Tamil and Chinese. Most speakers of English are educated and middle-class urban dwellers. Many, though not all, of them are non-Malays who may have little access to their own native tongues, or most probably prefer instead the internationality of English as a means of effective communication, though they are familiar enough with Malay as the medium of communication locally. ("Traversing Boundaries" 277).

K.S. Maniam and Gopal Baratham, the most prolific English-language authors of Malaysia and Singapore to date, thematize the issue of language in their respective polyglot societies.<sup>12</sup> In Maniam's first novel *The Return* (1981)<sup>13</sup> and Baratham's first novel *A Candle or the Sun* (1991),<sup>14</sup> the English language is carefully scrutinized as a cultural discourse that potentially contains and restricts that which it represents. To this end, each novelist makes evident, in different cultural contexts, Edward Said's post-structuralist reading of language as a highly systematized act of representation: "It hardly needs to be demonstrated that language itself is a highly organized and encoded system, which employs many devices to express, indicate, exchange messages and information, represent and so forth. In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation" (*Orientalism* 21).

Both K.S. Maniam and Gopal Baratham are third-generation diasporic subjects whose grandparents made the initial migration overseas and whose parents were born in British-ruled Malaya. Both also belong to the majority Tamil community of diasporic South Asians. Born in 1942 in Bedong, Kedah, West Malaysia, K.S. Maniam continues to reside in his country of birth. He has produced a multi-genre corpus of poetry, short stories, plays and novels. His two novels to date are *The Return* (1991) and *In a Far Country* (1993). Born in 1935 on the island of Singapore, Gopal Baratham also continues to reside in his country of birth. He also boasts a prestigious literary career as the author of several short story collections and three novels to date: *A Candle or the Sun* (1991), which is considered his first novel; *Sayang* (1991); and *Moonrise, Sunset* (1996).

In Maniam's bildungsroman, language has a paradoxical effect on the colonial-educated protagonist, Ravi. On the one hand, it affords him a way out of caste divisions (the legacy of his Hindu background) and the economic privations of an immigrant family whose beginnings can be traced back to one brave soul who appeared "suddenly out of the horizon, like a camel, with nothing except some baggage and three boys in tow" (*The Return* 1). On the other hand, his vocation as an English teacher simultaneously implicates him in the dissemination of colonial ideology and ironically marginalizes him further from the dominant indigenous population and the Tamil-speaking diasporic community.

In Baratham's kunstlerroman, the writer-protagonist, Hernando Perera, discerns that language is quickly turned into a discourse of power when deployed, be it as a political tool or aesthetic product, to hem in the complex fabric of individual and cultural identity. This realization assumes greater significance for the

Singaporean writer who resides in a city-state where “the voice of government is loud and clear, the hand of government strong and perceived to be authoritarian and omnipresent” (Geok, “Dissenting Voices” 285).<sup>15</sup>

For both Maniam and Baratham’s first-person narrators, therefore, a meaningful articulation of selfhood and nationhood necessitates a two-fold approach to language: first, each protagonist attempts to deconstruct language from its discursive and ideological basis; second, each writer attempts to push the limits of language to more fully *re-present* a cross-cultural imagination that is “capable of both responsible and creative dissent” (290)

Maniam’s first novel draws heavily on several autobiographical elements, such as the central symbolic figure of Ravi’s grandmother and his own profession as an English teacher/University professor. As Margaret Young states, “While Maniam has refuted the view that his work is ‘autobiographical’, attributing affinities to ‘coincidences rather than ‘events’, his writing is clarified in incalculable ways by an understanding of his life” (“K.S Maniam” 973). Indeed, the semi-rural setting of *The Return* and its focus on a caste- and class-stratified Tamil community whose livelihood was once closely tied to the rubber plantation estates not only reflects Maniam’s childhood in western Malaysia but also his diasporic consciousness among a community of South Asian immigrants. His first novel thus sets the stage for much of his fiction insofar as it characterizes diasporic experience as an often uneasy tension between the tightly woven social patterns and cultural codes of a relatively segregated community and his protagonist’s desire to enter “a larger area of consciousness [. . .] so as to emphasise the common bonds and concerns that illuminate the large and often bewildering impulse to be human” (Interview 23).



Maniam's short story, "Arriving" helps preface his first novel in bringing to the fore the complex relationship between language and diasporic identity in the process of self-definition.<sup>16</sup> In this story, Maniam's central diasporic character, Krishnan, must come to terms with the exclusionary labels of indenture/migrancy that continue to alienate him from wider Malaysian society in a post-colonial era. In the following passages, for instance, Krishnan attempts to reckon with the fact that his friend has resorted to calling him a "*pendatang*," a Malay word used in a discriminatory way to alienate non-Malay peoples by classifying them as permanent outsiders:

What did it mean, *pendatang*? Arrivals? Illegals? [. . .]

He tried to recall his father's memories of his voyage out to Malaysia but his mind was choked with some strange obstruction. [. . .] Yes, it had been his determination that had kept him innocent of his father's experiences. He had decided, when he became aware of his budding consciousness, not to be influenced by other people's memories and nostalgia. He clawed at familiarity. But he only floated, set adrift by this new uncertainty [. . .].

He struggled against the dark waters of uncertainty for a long time. Many times he was sucked into a fathomless fear, but, finally, he rose to the surface, strengthened. [. . .] ("Arriving" 9-11)

In grappling with the meaning of the word, Krishnan is forced to confront his immigrant history and, by extension, to immerse himself in the alienating metaphors of the indentured labourer's arduous journey across the "kala pani" (i.e., black waters). In so doing, Krishnan re-envision his Malaysian identity as one which is connected to the "elsewhere" of his ancestor's homeland, without the incumbent stigmatization of the "outsider." Krishnan thus reinvents the term in turning the image of cultural displacement into a transcendental mobility of spirit and mind: "*Pendatang*. One who arrives. One who goes through different experiences to reach the most enlightening knowledge, he thought" (11). Indeed, this process of re-

definition parallels his attempt to “re-define” his place in Malaysian society within the semantics of a more inclusive, cross-cultural identity.

Published over a decade before the above story, *The Return* is the author’s first novel-length attempt to give voice to the proverbial “*pendatang*” in Malaysian society. The protagonist Ravi thus embarks on an imaginative return to the moment of his ancestor’s “arrival” on foreign soil, not in a nostalgic attempt at recuperation but in a conscious reckoning with the multiple narratives of his/story. In the act of telling his ancestor’s diasporic history, therefore, Ravi deconstructs and overturns the pejorative connotations of the “*pendatang*.” In fact, the word comes to signify “the beginnings of a folk tradition that both expresses and supports the immigrant Indian’s survival in a new land” (Ping, “Cultural Crossings” page) <sup>17</sup> In other words, Ravi’s reckoning with the stigma of the cultural outsider is articulated as a diasporic poetics that replaces the neurosis of displacement with the ethics of survival.

Ironically, Ravi’s narrative is constructed in the language (i.e., the colonial “stepmother tongue”) that has come to rigidly define him as another kind of cultural outsider: that is, as a colonial subject. The protagonist’s orientation to the colonial language and culture is further problematized by his diasporic identity as an ethnic and linguistic minority. As the product of a colonial education, Ravi’s struggle to articulate a heterogeneous Malaysian identity is problematized by a language that “speaks” neither of his Tamil roots nor of his “Malaysian” cultural reality. Ravi’s connection to the past has therefore been doubly compromised by what Ngugi Wa Thiong’o describes as the two-pronged aim of the “colonialist imposition of a foreign language [. . .] as the destruction or deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture, their arts, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and

the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser" ("The Language of African Literature" 442). In a retrospective look at his first novel, Maniam himself admits, "Ravi cannot entirely go back to the old culture for he cannot eradicate from his consciousness the education and language that he has acquired" (Interview 18).

Maniam's first novel is thus less an examination of wider Malaysian society than it is a "basically realistic" (Young, "K.S. Maniam" 973) portrayal of the systematic erasure of ethnic identity under an assimilationist colonial discourse. Maniam's protagonist's initial response to English is thus reminiscent of Fanon's apprehension of the colonial language as an assault on the cultural psyche—an assault, as he states, on "local cultural originality" by "the language [. . .] that is, the culture of the mother country" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 18).

Consequently, the first casualties of Ravi's uprooting from a Tamil to an English school system are the folkloric and religious narratives of his grandmother, the pioneering member of his family who "arrived" on foreign soil. Referred to as "Periathai, the Big Mother" (*The Return* 4), Ravi's grandmother assumes mythic proportions for she speaks in a language which brings to life the gods and goddesses, folklore and sacred texts of Hinduism as well as embodies the collective memory of the historic diasporic journey. Indeed, like the indigenization of the signs and symbols of South Asian culture in the Caribbean landscape, Periathai's "saffron-scented, death-churned memories, stories, experiences and nostalgia" are shown to have infused the foreign "fringes and foothills" (7) of the Malaysian jungle with "the thick spiritual and domestic air she must have breathed there, back in some remote district in India" (6).

This distancing from the mother tongue severs the physical and psychic link between the originary homeland and country of settlement. Ravi's English education is thus described as a violent uprooting from all that is familiar. Consequently, he is thrust into a state of culture shock as jarringly as "the thunder and lighting that ripped the sky and destroyed a calm evening" (15). This is because Ravi's early Tamil education immersed him in a script that made accessible the strangely familiar symbols of his South Asian heritage as well as the immediate landscape of his "knowable world" of "shopkeepers, goldsmiths, newspaper-vendor, *chettiar* and labourer he saw daily" (22). Tamil functions as both a mythic and a living language because it evokes the diasporic subject's double consciousness, one in which the signs of loss and continuity co-exist.

In contrast, English appears to him as "strange, squiggly marks" which paint an entirely foreign landscape that "bewildered and fascinated" (26). English language acquisition renders him twice-removed from the homeland, a process of separation which first began with his ancestor's historic migration, and continues as a figurative voyage into the wholly alien/alienating terrain of a new language. Indeed, the more infused Ravi is in the discourse of "Englishness" and its attendant symptoms of "anglophilia," the more alienated he becomes from the language, customs, history and identity of his Tamil/South Asian community. Linguistic immersion thus even makes the most familiar cultural signs, such as his "mother's dark face" (26) or his peers' boyish banter, seem unrecognizable, if not "savage" (76).

At first, then, language immersion turns into an ironic negation or deracination of selfhood and cultural identity. To this end, Maniam structures his bildungsroman around the quintessential children's narrative, the fairy tale, which

mesmerizes and frightens a captivated audience into speechless submission. Indeed, Ravi's English teacher, Miss Nancy, is treated as an ironic symbol of the "civilizing mission" in her seemingly sadistic and terrifyingly realistic renditions of the fairy tale. Thus, in her ironically sinister penchant for the grotesque, she whips into submission "the savages" in her charge: "Miss Nancy reasoned, cajoled, jolted, mocked, 'feruled' and commanded. The boys, touched, persuaded, pampered and compelled, obeyed and changed" (57).

Ravi thus finds himself trapped in the language that symbolizes his peculiar predicament as the excluding subject who gradually dissociates himself from family and friends (his recognizable world), as well as the excluded subject among a European elite, a majority indigenous Malay populace and an increasingly incomprehensible Tamil community. To this end, Wong Ming Yook rightly suggests,

English serves quite well as the language to carry the ideas and metaphors of alienation occurring within migrant communities. Its alienness lends to its use a peculiar suitability, a deliberate dissonance and distancing between text and reader that only emphasises the extent of alienation experienced. For the Malaysian writer in English, this is amplified in the content of the writing itself, which is usually to do with the migrant consciousness struggling for integration and authenticity. (278)<sup>18</sup>

However, Ravi's discomfort arises not only from the gradual loss of his mother tongue but also from his growing awareness of the systems of exclusion in the various modes of cultural discourse to which he is exposed. Thus, Maniam deftly juxtaposes his childhood English teacher's sinister tones with the seemingly exclusionary language of his Tamil community and school-going peers. In other words, be it in his peers' mockery of Ravi's "English" affectations in what is their own 'broken English', in Miss Nancy's verbal assaults, or in his community's

recourse to Tamil to abuse or alienate him, Ravi states: "I wasn't comfortable in all the talk that stormed over my head" (*The Return* 75).

In keeping with the motif of imaginative returns to the moment of the immigrant's arrival on foreign shores, there is a paradoxical journey motif underscored by the novel's title and reinforced by the poem, "Full Circle" which punctuates Ravi's narrative. The journey motif and the alienating effects of a foreign language combine to form the central symbol of the diasporic narrator's sense of disconnection from his past and the coterminous impulse to break free from the repetitious cycles of history and its master narratives (be they in the alienating voice of the colonial culture, the host culture, the diasporic community or the "motherland").

In this sense, Kirpal Singh's observation about the diasporic writer in Singapore applies equally to the Malaysian context: "Though not frequently bitter or even cynical, many of the new literary works indicate a growing need to break free from bonds brought over from India through direct, intimate contact" (104). As both Maniam's novels demonstrate, however, India represents only one of the many cultural/historical narratives which inform the diasporic writer's consciousness in the process of self-definition.<sup>19</sup> Here again, language is the primary symbol of a heterogeneous identity that speaks of the multiply positioned diasporic subject whose cultural and historical points of reference are as numerous as the speech registers that constitute his heteroglossic world. As Anne Brewster suggests, *The Return* evokes Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia as a "multiplicity of voices" which are "engaged in an internal 'dialogue' with each other. Because these voices are drawn

from various socially stratified discourses the novel is the site of 'struggle among socio-linguistic points of view' ("Linguistic Boundaries" 175).

In Maniam's narratives, motifs and metaphors are overtly or indirectly overlaid with the complex religious symbols of the author's Hindu-Tamil heritage. The journey motif thus alludes to the "eternal story of arrival and departure" (169) inherent in reincarnation. Though many critics have interpreted Maniam's journey motif as a return to his Hindu values and heritage, Maniam seems less interested in hearkening back than motioning toward "wider horizons and bigger worlds" (Interview 23) so as to call attention to "how Indian religious belief can be both modified to suit new lands, peoples and customs" ("The Malaysian Novelist" 168). Subsequently, Maniam employs Hindu symbols as they pertain to the shared fabric of human experience. In this sense, reincarnation as the penultimate "story of arrival and departure" metaphorically evokes the continuous nature of identity-formation as a "motioning" towards new contexts that continually accrue meaning in the on-going process of human contact, cultural exchange and a person's own materially changing circumstances.

Maniam's juxtaposition of Ravi's dispassionate process of disassociation from family, community and culture seems to clearly situate him on the side of the dominant cultural discourse. However, Ravi's insertion of his ancestor's narrative of migration and survival into the "master narrative" counters the hegemonic effects of the step-mother tongue. On the one hand, then, the poem that signals the end of Ravi's narrative of "return," brings the protagonist "full circle" to the realization that "words will not serve" the "cultureless" (183). On the other hand, Ravi's diasporic

poetics of identity formation as a continual process serves to break the cycle of hegemony that “imprisoned [his] flesh, [his] thoughts” (184).

Since Ravi’s father’s attempt to literally transplant the signs and symbols of his South Asian identity end on a tragic note, Ravi looks for new ways to “belong,” not in the repetition of past narratives but in the poetic recuperation of the multiple narratives of his cross-cultural imagination. Ravi thus acknowledges his predecessor’s impassioned struggle “to drive some stake into the country” (*The Return* 147) but only as one aspect of his/story. Rather, Ravi “arrives” at a diasporic consciousness in which the struggle to “belong” does not capitulate into a poetics of nostalgia and loss but rather as “series of narratives, sets of metaphors with which to begin dismantling concepts of permanence as the desirable condition of being” (Mishra, “(B)ordering Naipaul” 226).

Unlike Maniam’s familiar diasporic setting of a close-knit community that is nonetheless fraught with conflict and tension, Baratham’s South Asian diasporic characters are considerably detached from any one cultural enclave. Baratham’s portrayal of “Singaporean-Indians” is unique insofar as these are citizens of the world’s most urbanized nation who consequently function as detached metropolitan beings primarily defined in professional terms. In fact, Baratham himself can be said to write from “the consciousness of an English-educated, and to some extent detribalized, Tamil-Singaporean [. . .]” (Le Blond, “Gopal Baratham” 103).

In Baratham’s case, the absence of community in his novels not only reflects the anonymity inherent in city life, but also alludes to the Singapore establishment’s own drive to encourage inter-racial cohabitation. As noted in Sharon Siddique and



Nirmala PuruShotam's seminal study, *Singapore's Little India: past, present and future*, "one of PAP's main alterations of geopolitical space has been to attempt to racially integrate otherwise segregated communities in public housing estates" (7). In *A Candle or the Sun*, the process of deterritorialization is alluded to in Perera's domicile within one of the many "state-subsidized housing estates" (COS 39). In fact, the inter-related effects of deterritorialization and "detrribalization" on Baratham's (South Asian) characters is reinforced in the narrator's story, "double exposure": here, Alaga, the product of Perera's creative imagination, not only prefers voyeurism over actual human contact but also finds that his Chinese neighbour knows more about his South Asian heritage (ironically represented in her touristic dalliance with Yoga and Sanskrit) than he does.

The above observations notwithstanding, the absence of explicitly South Asian diasporic themes in Baratham's first two novels could also reflect what some critics refer to as a common pattern of self-censorship in Singaporean writing. As Catherine Lim points out, "Any topic that could be construed as even remotely touching upon the sensitive issues of race, language and religion in this multiethnic society is likely to be self-censored out at manuscript stage" ("The Writer" 39). If this is true of *A Candle or the Sun*, it is only true in the most ironic sense, for the novel is itself an unabashed critique of the inter-related processes of self-censorship and state censorship.

According to Peter Hyland, Baratham was himself at the centre of controversy when he publicly denounced the Singapore National Development Council for denying *A Candle or the Sun* its due recognition because of what he deemed its unease with the novel's political content.<sup>20</sup> What Baratham's novel foregrounds, then,

is the monopoly that the State implicitly holds over cultural discourse, which subsequently results in forms of self-censorship and, more generally, arrests cultural development, at least in terms of its literary production.

In Baratham's subsequent novels, it is possible to see not only more explicitly "South Asian" characters, but a more scathing satirization of the cultural hypocrisies prevalent across Singapore's multi-racial communities. Indeed, by *Moonrise, Sunset* (1996), his third and most recent novel to date, Baratham thematizes and critiques the more fundamentalist strains of religious discourse imported by such organizations as *Arya Samaj* to Singapore's Hindu community. In *Moonrise, Sunset*, Baratham even offers a partial glimpse into the famous "Serangoon Road" community of Singapore's "Little India."

While Maniam writes in a minority language and from a minority perspective, therefore, Baratham writes in the language that has come to express "a national literature" (Hyland 428), from his relatively integrated position in contemporary Singaporean society. Thus, in *A Candle or the Sun*, the English language is shown to be used at every level of communication, both in its official capacity and in its "nativized varieties" (Seong 64). In fact, Baratham's first-person narrator-writer, Hernando Perera, takes great liberties with language, engaging in word play and poking fun at those whose speech patterns betray even the slightest traces of artifice or mimicry. The pre-eminent status of English notwithstanding, then, Baratham is also aware of the obvious colonial import of English, both in cultural and literary terms—at least in the extent to which it imposes external standards and cultural models at the expense of local ingenuity and expression.

Much like Maniam, Baratham also attempts to stretch the cultural parameters of English beyond its privileged and politically enshrouded function. Thus, Baratham's three novels to date, *A Candle or the Sun* (1991), *Sayang* (1991) and *Moonrise, Sunset* (1996), explore the seedy underbelly of Singapore's officiously-run establishment, as well as raising culturally taboo subjects, such as AIDS, homophobia, illicit sexual behaviour, the inflexibility of moral codes, the question of censorship and, of course, the political import and deployment of language itself. *A Candle or the Sun* thus immediately exposes its author's Foucaultian reading of the complicit discourses of power in contemporary Singaporean society. Indeed, in a work that is set within a city-state which is, itself, an artifice of sorts--given its recent history as a "Western colonial construct [. . . such that] Western colonialism is inscribed in Singapore's very ontology, and in the very composition of its predominantly immigrant population" (Ang and Stratton, quoted in Kanaganayakam, 73)--it is not surprising that *A Candle or the Sun* invariably explores the construction of identity and identity politics.

In this regard, it is also of little surprise that Baratham is the most experimental novelist among the authors under study, whose penchant for metafiction serves to draw parallels between the writer's manipulation of language for aesthetic ends and the State's deployment of language for ideological ends. In fact, Perera's development as an artist unfolds as a self-conscious acknowledgment of the way language can apprehend the complex fabric of experience as much as it can flatten the inter-textual dynamics of cultural and national identity by hemming it in to its "proper social context" (*COS* 17).

Baratham's most poignant attack on the deployment of language in the dissemination of state ideology is found in the guise of his first-person narrator. In struggling to come to terms with his role as a writer in wider Singaporean society, Hernando Perera questions the point at which creative expression is hindered by a state in which culture/cultural production is part and parcel of governance and state policy. It is significant, then, that Perera keeps his creative interests separate from his professional life in the awareness that an "official" writing career could be compromised in the service of State interests.

Baratham thus relies heavily on "speech patterns" and a correlative motif of the "freedom of speech" in the portrayal of character. In fact, his multi-racial cast of characters compose a polyvocal portrait of accents, lexical affectations and linguistic idiosyncrasies that are unique to Singaporean society. For example, Perera's Chinese-Indian wife, Sylvie, is said to talk in "mismatched clichés which gave her conversation a jokiness and ambiguity." In other words, Sylvie's linguistic hybridity mirrors the ambiguous nature of her origins as a "lovely hybrid" (12). Perera favours Sylvie's speech, for its uncontrived brand of interlingual mixing is shown to enhance her speech and, by extension, enrich her character. As Baratham himself comments on the issue of cultural and racial hybridity, "I would like everybody to be multi-ethnic [. . .]. My ex-wife is Chinese and my children are mixtures. I do find hybrids softer because I think they are more uncertain" (Interview 93). Indeed, while Baratham is keenly aware of the different social registers of English across class and cultural backgrounds, his fiction celebrates the diverse cultural composition of Singapore's multilingual population.<sup>21</sup>

In Baratham's implicit critique of the proverbial "mimic man," therefore, there is an implicit jab at the establishment's favouring of "a version of British English over local, Singlish versions of the language" (Hyland 429). Though "Singlish" (the local hybridized version of English) is relatively absent in the novel, the multi-lingual, syncretic character of Singaporean society that the novel brings to life stands in direct contrast to speech patterns that are portrayed as imitative and contrived. For instance, Perera's parents are representative of a second-generation of diasporic peoples who, having grown up during the colonial heyday, are shown to resort to a form of linguistic mimicry that annoys the writer/narrator. For example, Perera is irritated by his mother's habit of imitating the melodramatic scenes of 1950s Hollywood films or by his father's brand of intellectual mimicry. Indeed, Perera perceives his father, a retired school teacher given to quoting Shakespeare, as a "long-winded, somewhat pedantic phoney" (190). To this end, Perera's parents become empty, parodic signifiers of their colonial heritage.

In a racially and linguistically delineated society, Baratham also reveals the extent to which discourses of power are quite literally embedded in accents and linguistic affectations. Thus, Perera's Chinese boss, Chuang, speaks in Confucian aphorisms that reflect a Chinese education system of rote learning in the "teaching of ancient ways". Moreover, Perera exposes the distinct ideological rift between Chuang's Confucian teachings and the context to which they are applied: "We must flung out Western values leading to moral decay, unemployment and social welfare. No more imitating falsity. Right here in furniture department. [. . .] we install traditional Asian values [. . .]. Here we recommence true Asian spirit of co-operation

and co-prosperity. Vanquish cut-throat competition from Manila, Jakarta and Thailand” (45).

For Perera, Chuang’s speech is a symbol of the seeming ideological dissonance found in Singapore’s fervently anti-Communist, pro-capitalist stance and its insistence on foregrounding the shared “Asian spirit of co-operation and co-prosperity.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Chuang’s brand of “truth” sounds smugly disingenuous given his own racially and socially dominant position as a member of the Chinese-Singaporean “management”: “In Chuang’s manner this morning was not only the conviction that he spoke the truth but that he spoke the truth over which he had been given proprietary rights” (44-5).

Baratham’s portrayal of Samson, one of the few explicitly “South Asian” diasporic characters in his first novel, directly parodies the Singaporean establishment, both in its intellectual and political persona. Samson Alagaratnam’s cultural and intellectual hypocrisy is first made evident in the footnote Perera provides about his childhood friend’s apostasy: i.e., Samson is described as a Hindu who turned to Christianity “to be part of what he saw as the established order” (16). As the now established “authority in English Literature” and in his high-ranking position in the Ministry of Culture, Samson’s rise to the top is attributed to his ability to mimic and conform to the appropriate manners of speech/discourse required for the job at hand, rather than any self-proclaimed talents as a “word-wallah” (98).<sup>23</sup> Samson is thus a caricature of the complicity of the Singaporean intelligentsia with the representatives of officialdom. As Perera emphasizes:

He frequently, if inconsistently, adopted the idiom and accent of a disc jockey. Samson had, initially, adopted this manner of speech to be, as he put it ‘trendy’. The pursuit of the contemporary was, however, not

its only purpose. It had become a habit with which he disguised the intentions of his words, and the nastier these were the more colourful did his affectations become. (17)

Indeed, Samson's terse, colourful catch phrases echo the establishment's penchant for sloganeering in getting its political messages across. Thus, his jingoistic jargon ranges from the materialistic and banal--"It's like you got bad breath, man, and nobody will get near you till they know you're chewing double mint" (17)--to the official party line-- "Multiracial harmony's the beat, right?" or "there are a million things to write about in this multiracial, culturally plenipotential society that retains tradition without losing flexibility" (18).

Baratham's own linguistic flare can be seen in his skilful manipulation of the subtle shifts in tone--from the comical to the sinister or from the innocent to the vulgar--that mirror the almost imperceptible shifts between the openly broadcasted and "classified" aspects of government discourse. For example, when Perera presses his friend on the subject of police brutality, Samson's usual idiomatic, caricatural discourse is couched in vulgar analogies and sadistic undertones: "Ain't this modern Singapore? We got electricity, boyyo, and [ . . . ] refrigeration [ . . . ]. Once we stick a cat's wick into an ice-block it rarely lights up again" (152).

To a great extent, Baratham struggles with the question of the public and private function of writing itself. The very structure of Baratham's novel mirrors the delineation between public and private spheres, such that Perera divides his own narrative between autobiography and fiction. For Perera, creative expression has thus far served as a private outlet for a more or less conservative imagination. Perera's employment in the furniture section of a department store--a metonym for the nation

itself--thus mirrors his personal credo to compartmentalize experience so as to control and contain "the ungainly contours of events" (20).

Like the wintery "Christmas dinner tableau" (6) that Perera creates to please a tropics-bound clientele, Perera's writing is equally stilted by archetypes and artifice. In fact, Perera's development as an artist is contingent upon his awareness of the impossibility of keeping his public and private, imaginative and lived experience so neatly separated: "I had decided to compartmentalize my life, to live in sealed rooms that had no communicating doors. But words made this impossible. They crept like mildew upon the walls, spreading from one room to the other, connecting them" (109).

In this sense, the novel's metafictional quality stylistically evokes not only the tension between the public and private aspect of communication but also the delineation between the aesthetic and social function of art. *A Candle or the Sun* thematizes, therefore, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's assertion that the Singaporean writer has traditionally restricted his/her writing to universal themes because of "the writer's ideology of 'art for art's sake'; from the ideology of English as a world language, with its own set of Western, cosmopolitan values and removed from Asian identity" (*Writing South/East Asia* 119). Ironically, then, there is some truth to Samson's criticism of Perera's pandering to an international, Western market at the expense of a local audience: "'Your stories makes waves on the BBC, you group into anthologies of Asian writing, yet back in homesville you're Mr Unknown'" (*COS* 17).

Baratham appears critical of this trend, but is equally conscious of the fact that the turn away from the international towards the local is not an easy transition for the Singaporean writer. As Singaporean writer/scholar Kirpal Singh notes, "in a small



tightly-knit society like Singapore, expression and exploration of sensitive issues [. . .] is bound to encourage provocation [. . .]. The writer, therefore, always conscious of his role and more so of his duty, hesitates, becomes necessarily cautious” (“An Approach” 12). Subsequently, Baratham questions the particular dilemma of the Singaporean writer as caught between not only the expectations of the international marketplace but also the implicit pressures at the local level to conform to national cultural standards.

When Perera is confronted by the very real consequences of the transgressive nature of language, he becomes aware of his own seeming ineffectuality as an “impressionistic and esoteric” (Singh 12) writer. Up to his encounter with the “Children of the Book,” a subversive youth-led organization whose primary function is to offer a counter-discourse to the State, Perera is shown to be unaffected by the political import of language and communication: “I have never felt inhibited by the censorship prevailing in Singapore, nor have I felt the urge for mass communication. However, the possibility that other people might miss what I did not require was not something that escaped me” (*COS* 58). In other words, it is only when his own writing goes “public” that Perera is able to see both the ideological deployment of language as well as its potential for agency and change.

It is in terms of the post-independence context that Malaysia and Singapore have so obviously parted ways. In Malaysia, the official language of communication is in keeping with its Malay-dominant population. On the other hand, Singapore has adopted English as its *lingua franca* among a Chinese-dominant though polyglot population, a linguistic ploy that has certainly had its material benefits in a globalized economy but one that has caused considerable anxiety in the expression of

Singaporean cultural consciousness. And it is within this complex and divergent linguistic, cultural and political framework that Maniam and Baratham's novels emerge.

Both writers were born during the tail-end of British rule and so are necessarily sensitive to the hegemonic deployment of the English language as a cultural and political tool. Both writers are also of Tamil background and therefore enjoy a majority status among South Asian diasporic communities in the Malaysian peninsula. However, each writer has spent the bulk of his life in a post-colonial era which, as I have outlined above, signals the contrasting positions of peoples of Tamil/South Asian background in the Malaysian and Singaporean contexts as well as the differentiation of English language usage in each country.

The political import of language thus immediately comes to the fore as the common thematic thread that ties Maniam and Baratham's otherwise wholly different first novels. Both writers are keenly aware of the historical and actual uses of language in the management of the polyglot and culturally diverse societies of Malaysia and Singapore. For Ravi, therefore, the "return to culture" (Interview 17) is not a linear return to his Tamil roots but a cross-temporal motioning toward the hybridized, plural culture of his immediate surroundings. For Baratham, the call for a more honest expression of individual, cultural and national identity seems worth the risk of admission if the alternative is to err on the side of caution in the illusive separation of political and creative life into discreet entities.

Indeed, both writers have attempted to push the limits of language in responding to the multiple and often conflicting demands of their cross-cultural backgrounds in which the borders of the mind, like the borders of the world, are

“increasingly porous” (Geok 291). In this sense, Maniam and Baratham echo other non-native English language writers for whom cultural discourse is often weighted by the accumulative “sighs of history” (Walcott ),<sup>24</sup> and, conversely, for whom literature is the “attempt to increase the sum of what it is possible to think” (Rushdie 15).<sup>25</sup> While I am not suggesting that either Maniam or Baratham experiment with the English language to the degree that is evident throughout Salman Rushdie’s oeuvre, they nonetheless self-consciously subvert the potential of their “step-mother tongue” to impose a monolingual tradition or hegemonic cultural discourse at the expense of their diverse cultural and linguistic environments. Maniam does this thematically and symbolically, while Baratham does this more explicitly in his interlingual mixing and his obvious delight in word play.

For the diasporic subject/writer, language is both the most visible sign of loss (i.e., the disintegration of ties to the originary culture), as well as the primary vehicle for self-definition. Thus, in a heteroglossic and multi-racial environment, both Maniam and Baratham evoke a multiply positioned identity that sees in language not the basis for a self-sustaining, essentialist ontology, but, rather, a reflection of a collective identity that is as ambivalent and fragmented as it is syncretic and polyvalent.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> European colonization refers not only to British rule but to competing Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, French and English interests. Britain established formal imperial rule in 1819 when Thomas Stamford Raffle acquired Singapore from the Sultan of Johore (a period during which the Dutch still held on to Malacca, an important region in the Malaysian peninsula). See Milton W. Meyer's *Asia: A Concise History*, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> The ethnic make-up of Singapore, for instance, is 76.9% Chinese; 19.7% Malay; 8.8% Indian; and 4.3% 'Other'. (See Siddique and PuruShotam's *Singapore's Little India: past, present, and future*, 1982). The ethnic make-up of the Malaysian Peninsula as a whole is as follows: 50 % Malay; 37.1% Chinese; 11.% South Asian; 1.5% 'Other.' (See C. Hirshman's *Ethnic and Social Stratification in Peninsular Malaysia*.)

<sup>3</sup> See Rajeswary Ampalavanar's study *The Indian Minority and Political Change in Malaya: 1945-1957*.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, despite the 'Malayization' of Malaysia, the Chinese continued to dominate business and trade, and Malays themselves continued to suffer economic hardships in the years following Independence. After a period of considerable political unrest and racial tension which led to a 2-year state of emergency in 1969, Malaysia came to enjoy considerable economic prosperity and stabilized race relations under the leadership, since 1981, of Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohammed.

<sup>5</sup> Here, I am using John Skinner's term to refer to the Empire's permanent linguistic imprint on non-native English speakers. See Skinner's *The Stepmother Tongue*, a study of Anglophone writing around the world.

<sup>6</sup> Such generalizations are tentatively made in the awareness that Malaysian English Literature is itself a relatively new body of writing, particularly in the form of the novel. There are of course exceptions even now such as the poet, playwright and short story writer Ghulam-Sarwar Yousuf. Indeed, a comparative study of Maniam and Yousuf would be an important contribution to existing criticism of English language Malaysian literature.

<sup>7</sup> Though the minorities within each “racial group” are in relative control of their community activities, languages, religious beliefs, etc., the historic stratification of labour in Singaporean society has resulted in the presence of Chinese and Indian peoples in a fair cross-section of society, the continued elite status of English and Eurasian peoples, and what Clammer refers to as “disaffected” status of indigenous Malays in their relatively lower occupational positions.

<sup>8</sup> See Catherin Lim’s article, “The Writer Writing in English in Multiethnic Singapore: A Cultural Peril, A Cultural Promise.” Critics concur that Malaysian and Singaporean English literature began in the 1940s and 1950s, prior to the region’s political split in 1965. Lim and other critics such as Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and Kirpal Singh refer to the “nascent” stage of Singaporean English literature not so much in chronological terms but in terms of its recent distancing from Western canonical standards and also in terms of its recent emergence in novel form. Like other diasporic locations, the novel in English has been the latest to appear on the literary scene.

<sup>9</sup> This is equally true of the Malaysian context. See specifically the informative overview of Malaysian English Literature by Wong Ming Yook, “Traversing Boundaries: Journeys into Malaysian Fiction in English.” See also Malachi Edwin Vethamani’s brief overview of “Malaysian, Singaporean and Fijian Writers of the Indian Diaspora.” Both articles are found in *World Literature Today*.

<sup>10</sup> There is an interesting debate at work here over which Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and Peter Hyland seem to stand at polar ends. While Lim argues that Singaporean English Literature needs to break itself free from Western-imposed standards of canonicity, etc., and forge its own literary identity, Peter Hyland argues that Singaporean literature can only achieve such a status if it is “evaluated by non-Singaporean critics” and if the “voices of Singaporean critics be heard more widely beyond the national boundaries” (431). Hyland’s underlying assumption that a wider readership, like a wider base of criticism, takes local literatures out of often small, self-reflexive literary circles stands to reason. However, I believe that Singaporean English literature, itself, is proving Lim’s view on its own terms.

<sup>11</sup> In 1957, the Federation of Malaya marked the official last step in the process of decolonization. Malaysia and Singapore were united up until Singapore's split with the Federation of Malaya to form an independent city-state in 1965.

<sup>12</sup> Both Maniam and Baratham have been preceded by one other novelist of (mixed) South Asian descent. In Maniam's case, this is the Eurasian writer, Lloyd Fernando, author of *Scorpion Child* (1976) and *Green is the Colour* (1993), whose works focus more on the particularly volatile 50s/60s era of race relations in Malaysia than on the South Asian diasporic community itself. Baratham's precursor is the more internationally renowned Philip Jeyaratnam, of Anglo-Indian parentage, who has authored *Raffles Place Ragtime* (1988) and *Abraham's Promise* (1995) and who now lives in Canada.

<sup>13</sup> All citations from *The Return* are from the first edition published by Heinemann Asia in 1981. There is also a second edition published by Skoob Books in 1996, which offers a more scholarly treatment of the novel with an introduction by Dr. C.W. Watson, Anne Brewster's article "Linguistic Boundaries" (also found in *A Sense of Exile: Essays in the Literature of the Asia-Pacific Region*) and "A Note in Preview" by Ooi Boo Eng.

<sup>14</sup> All citations from *A Candle or the Sun* are from the first edition published by Serpent's Tail in 1991. All parenthetical references to the novel will appear as *COS*.

<sup>15</sup> Singapore became an independent city-state in 1965, headed by its founder Lee Kuan Yew. It has since been governed and dominated by one party, formed in 1954, as PAP (People's Action Party). See Nena Vreland et al: *Area Handbook for Singapore*, 1977.

<sup>16</sup> See "Arriving" in Maniam's collection entitled *Arriving and Other Stories*, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Dr. Tang Soo Ping provides a wonderful close reading of Maniam's *The Return*. See "Cultural Crossings: Renegotiating Identity and Belief in K.S. Maniam's *The Return*" originally published in *Jurnal Bahasa Jendela Alam* in 1996. The version used here is found on-line: [www.asian-child.com/maniam](http://www.asian-child.com/maniam).

<sup>18</sup> Wong Ming Yook offers the most informative and up-to-date overview of Malaysian English writing in "Traversing Boundaries: Journeys into Malaysian Fiction in English."

<sup>19</sup> See Maniam's *In a Far Country* (1993). This novel takes its protagonist out of his immediate Tamil community and more fully immerses him in contemporary Malaysian society.

<sup>20</sup> As Hyland points out, Baratham's accusation is somewhat problematized given the fact that his novel has been well-received in Singapore itself, as well as officially recognized and "taught in undergraduate courses at the National University" (427).

<sup>21</sup> While this is evident throughout Baratham's oeuvre, it is particularly overt in *Moonrise, Sunset*. For example, the first-person narrator goes so far as to provide an etymology of the particle "lah" (an abbreviation of "Allah")--an interlingual trait that is echoed across the Islamic-influenced Malaysian Peninsula.

<sup>22</sup> See Clammer for a complete definition of "cultural policy" and its particular manifestation in Singapore.

<sup>23</sup> Notice how Perera's own vocabulary changes to accommodate the particular linguistic background of each of his characters. Here, he describes Alagaratnam's profession by using the Hindu/Urdu suffix "wallah" (the equivalent of the English "-ist"). Hence, Alagaratnam is a "word-wallah," the one who specializes in words or language.

<sup>24</sup> The notion of the "sigh of history" is echoed throughout Walcott's oeuvre. It refers to the ruptured sense of identity and history that is, in part, so profoundly represented by the writer's immersion in an imposed language.

<sup>25</sup> See "Imaginary Homelands" in the collection of essays of the same title. Indeed, Rushdie is perhaps the most obvious and significant example of the cooptation of English to reflect the interlingual spirit of the immigrant writer.

## Conclusion



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As a body of writing that has gestated in the lap of European imperial history, the South Asian diasporic text's primary intervention manifests itself as an internal critique of colonial hegemony and, more specifically, of the exploitative system of indentured labour. To this end, South Asian diasporic writers necessarily evoke and nuance, from their variously positioned geopolitical perspectives, the tropes, themes and concerns of post-colonial literature. Indeed, the prevalent use of English as the diasporic writers' literary medium is itself a telling reminder that South Asian diasporic peoples are inextricably tied to the master narratives of the British Empire.

South Asian diasporic texts are also situated at the discursive intersection between post-coloniality and migrancy. Indeed, the novels under study explore not simply the "politics" of identity, the interrelationship between race and power in ethnically stratified communities, and the hegemonic modes of cultural discourse in which South Asian diasporic peoples are, themselves, often directly or indirectly engaged, but also the broader issues of migration, settlement and belonging. The following questions illustrate the way in which the diasporic novels under study can be seen to implicitly or explicitly thematize these inter-related concerns:

- What does it mean to "belong"?
- In what sense is a "return" to one's originary homeland possible (through myth, memory, symbol, the imagination, etc.)?
- Can one fully participate in the country of settlement in the process of "looking back" to the originary homeland as an object of loss?

- How does one reconcile the competing allegiances which constitute a fractured identity?
- How does one ensure cultural survival without falling prey to an essentialist and exclusivist politics of identity?
- Can identity be both self-affirming and open-ended?
- Does the state of living “across cultures” or “between worlds” engender a more comparative and, therefore, critical worldview?
- How is integration possible in a society where race and ethnicity are factors which determine discriminatory social practices and state policies?
- At what point (after how many generations) does the diasporic subject become “indigenous”?
- Is political/cultural autonomy possible for the (post-colonial) nation-state without the concomitant emancipation of women/without a critical re-examination of marginalized identities?

South Asian diasporic literatures are accordingly incorporated into the English literary curriculum only in their representative capacity as “post-colonial” texts or examples of “immigrant” writing.<sup>1</sup> As I have illustrated, however, a comparative reading of the novels under study as “diasporic texts” disturbs the standard foci of post-colonial theory, which homogenizes an otherwise multi-racial/pluri-cultural cast of characters as an unqualified alliance of “colonial” or “subaltern” subjects. This is because South Asian diasporic literature addresses both the colonial and post-colonial moment as highly particularized and context-specific historical trajectories, rather than as homogeneous time-frames which have produced a set of universal conditions.

Even as examples of “immigrant” writing, therefore, diasporic texts deconstruct current conceptual and theoretical models. For instance, Salman Rushdie, one of the

most internationally acclaimed “immigrant/post-colonial” writers of South Asian origins, boasts a cosmopolitan perspective which is sometimes erroneously applied to other kinds of migrant South Asian writers. As a first-generation immigrant in Britain, Rushdie upholds that modern-day émigrés “straddle two cultures [. . . or] fall between two stools” (“Imaginary Homelands” 15). In contrast, diasporic writers often insist that, at least for second and subsequent generations, this state of “inbetweenness” is not always applicable to people whose links to the “homeland” have long been severed but who nonetheless retain their cultural roots in their respective diasporic locations, or who have long since secured their sense of “home” in the country of settlement.

Moreover, Rushdie’s conceptualization of the cosmopolitan’s free-floating mobility between the point of origin and country of settlement must be qualified as the perspective of a first-generation immigrant whose ties to the homeland are reinforced by extended family networks, by the recent memory of personal and historical landmarks, and by frequent visits or communications with those who have remained behind--luxuries which are not always available to the diasporic subject who is several generations removed from the originary culture.

Thus, be it in their own interrogations of “post-colonial” and “immigrant” experience, South Asian diasporic writers nuance, if not problematize, cultural phenomena such as “hybridity,” literary domains such as “minority writing,” theoretical models such as the “national allegory,” etc. Indeed, in their multiply positioned identities, South Asian diasporic writers invariably resist their containment within fixed and monolithic paradigms which rarely correspond to the diverse and complex reality of human relations and migratory patterns.

To this end, diasporic writers emphasize their pre-colonial histories and, by extension, the religious, sociocultural and other features of their South Asian origins. not merely in the desire to reimagine the past but also to a) foreground the heterogeneity of experience and b) expose the points of complicity and confluence of ideological and cultural systems. Subsequently, they bring to view a more nuanced apprehension of minority experience, of the process of migration and of group dynamics as they are determined by class and caste hierarchies, gendered, racial and sexual discriminations, and inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. A comparative reading of South Asian diasporic novels illustrates, therefore, that in their own investigations of “difference,” these texts first beg the question, in relation to “what” or to “whom”?

Thus, even the most cursory comparative glance of a few diasporic writers from radically different contexts--namely, Mauritius, Uganda, South Africa, Guyana, Trinidad, Malaysia and Singapore--provides a more in-depth glimpse at the legacies of indenture history across the colonial and post-colonial era. In this light, diasporic peoples are found to be “positioned” within and by the narratives of the past; they can also be seen to form an agential body politic that can radically alter and influence the landscapes they inhabit. This is most poetically brought to view in Deepchand Beeharry’s sociohistorical novel of the entrapment of indentured peoples within an inherently exploitative system and the eventual transformation of Mauritius into a creolized collective that has come to be dominated by its Indo-Mauritian populace.

In another context, Malaysian writer K.S. Maniam complicates the issue of minority discourse in the juxtaposition between his protagonist’s background as a

member of the dominant Tamil-Hindu diasporic community and his minority ethnic and religious status in wider Malaysian society. Similarly, Caribbean writers such as Narmala Shewcharan and Sharlow Mohammed nuance post-colonial paradigms in ironizing the fact that even though Indo-Caribbean peoples share or claim a majority status in Guyana and Trinidad respectively, they nonetheless contend with a dominant Creole culture, Christian norms and/or Afro-Caribbean political strongholds.

Conversely, all of the diasporic writers under study problematize the archetypal view of the “subaltern” as a victimized or subordinate entity in turning their gaze inward to the class, caste, gender and other hierarchies that stratify their own communities. Moreover, several writers accomplish this by celebrating diasporic experience as a narrative of upward mobility: i.e., as the proverbial immigrant “success story” (Persaud, *BITW* 201). Here, Lakshmi Persaud offers the most interesting case in point, for though the author offers a feminist revisioning of Indo-Trinidadian experience, her female protagonist is often complicit in the biases of her family’s caste and class privileges.

What is often lacking in considerations of South Asian diasporic writing is thus a contextualization of the “diaspora” paradigm itself, an oversight which subsequently precludes a discussion of indenture history as a foundational narrative in the evolution of a characteristically “South Asian” diasporic imaginary. Indeed, the historic departure from the signs and symbols of fraternity and the subsequent formation of a newly allied body that is pitted against the forces of an alien environment can be said to form the structural cornerstone of a distinctly diasporic consciousness. Subsequently, the multiple voices that hearken back to the first wave

of migration as their formative point of origin in the diasporic location are keenly aware of the interrelationship between the moment of their ancestors' arrival in the colony and the ensuing struggles and triumphs of resettlement over multiple generations.

A comparative consideration of these diasporic texts nonetheless cautions against a reading of South Asian diasporic identity that does not take into consideration the historically specific and simultaneously processual nature of diasporic experience, as it is embodied and transformed in individuals, communities and nations. In fact, the diasporic novel is pervaded by a paradoxical poetics of identity which reveals diasporic peoples to be as affected by, if not a factor in, the processes of cultural hybridization and diversification, as they are prone to the discourse of ethnic exclusivism and cultural essentialism.

The overriding impulse of the South Asian diasporic imagination is thus to bring to bear the lessons of history while affirming that even the most seemingly helpless figures carry the potential for transformative action. As such, the diasporic subject's seemingly commonplace struggle for survival, in the often painful awareness of a fractured identity, is celebrated as an intrinsically heroic act. Indeed, each of these novels sets the stage for an epic imaginary that unfolds as an ongoing quest to triumph over both the external and self-imposed limitations of the human condition, in the poetics of possibility that is subtly embodied in the "multiply positioned" identity of the diasporic subject.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> My assertion that South Asian Diasporic Literature in English deconstructs the post-colonial paradigm was first posited in a paper entitled “To Canada from ‘My Many Selves’: Addressing the Theoretical Implications of South Asian Diasporic Literature in English as a Pedagogical Paradigm.” I presented this paper at the *Post-Colonialism and Pedagogy Symposium* hosted by the English Department of the University of Ottawa in May 2002. This paper is scheduled to be published in May 2004 by the University of Ottawa Press in a collection entitled *Home-Work: Postcolonialism, Pedagogy, and Canadian Literature*.

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